RANGELAND ROMANCES
FEB.
15¢
TEMPTRESS OF DREAM VALLEY
by MARIAN O'HEARN
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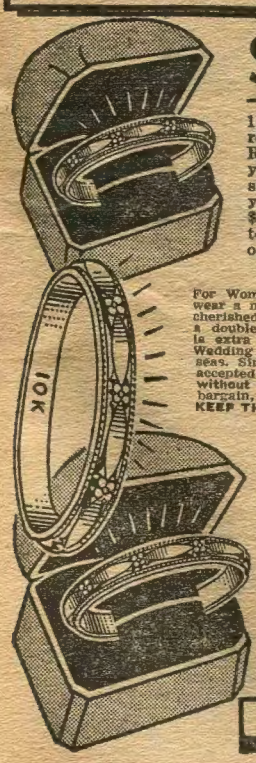

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LOVE STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

RANGELAND ROMANCES

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ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS
March Issue Will Be Published January 26th

Volume Thirty | February, 1945 | Number One

Rollicking Western Love Novel

TEMPTRESS OF DREAM VALLEY ..... **Marian O'Hearn** 8
Beautiful, affection-hungry Sue didn't know whether or not she wanted to hire a foreman—who didn't like girls.

Two Exciting Romance Novelettes

NO KISSES FOR NESTERS ..... **Ennen Reaves Hall** 40
Torchy, luscious spitfire of the Lazy S, rode to rout out a lowly nester. . . .

VIXEN OF MYSTERY MESA ..... **Robert Turner** 80
It was a tough choice for lovely Angie to make—reveal a guarded secret . . . or abandon a wounded cowboy who had fought for her.

Five Short Stories of Pioneer Sweethearts

THE LOOM SINGS OF LOVE ..... **Jane Hardey** 24
Della had to make a rancher fall in love with her—before he learned that her sophisticated sister was leaving him flat.

FIRST BEAU FOR A HERMIT GIRL ..... **Bill Severn** 32
Kissing was a new, delicious thrill for Sukie—even though Larry was going to marry another girl.

SIXGUN SWEETHEART ..... **Agnes Best Nafziger** 54
Sassy, salty Mikkie thought it would be good fun to pose as a prim school teacher.

STARLIGHT TRAIL TO TROUBLE ..... **Lillian Lane** 64
Rather than go back East to become a kitchen drudge, pretty Kathie decided to risk a dash through redskin territory.

BEWARE A HEART DOCTOR ..... **Brian Waggoner** 70
Vivacious Victory Hayden had to convince her miner sweetheart that they couldn't build their love on the ashes of another romance.

Features and Departments

PIN-UP GIRL ..... **A Contest** 23
A captivating Western beauty—and a limerick.

LOVE BOSSES THE TUMBLING X ..... **The Editor** 6
A preview peek at "Who'll Tame the Carnival Siren?"

MAKE YOUR OWN RANCH CLOTHES ..... **A Department** 38
New styles for the rangeland girl.

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK ..... **Myrtle Juliette Corey** 53
Hunker down and have some Arizona hash.

PONY EXPRESS ..... **A Department** 79
Here are the lively pen pals.

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter April 19, 1937 at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Foreign postage 75c additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.
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LOVE BOSSES THE TUMBLING X

OVER the entrance to the carnival tent was a big banner. On it was the picture of a woman in spangled tights. She had tremendous shoulders and bulging biceps. In the picture, she looked about ten feet tall and built proportionately—a veritable giant of a woman.

The fancy, foot-high lettering of the banner proclaimed:

COME IN AND SEE TITIA THE TERRIBLE—A REDHEADED AMAZON—THE STRONGEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD AND CHAMPION CHINESE WRESTLER OF AMERICA—SEE HER LIFT 500-POUND WEIGHTS—SEE HER CHALLENGE ANY MAN IN THE AUDIENCE—COME ONE COME ALL—SHE'S AS BEAUTIFUL AS SHE IS POWERFUL!

Bess Thatcher, owner of the big Tumbling X, took a determined step toward the entrance of the carnival tent.

Hank Randall, her handsome, six-foot-two ramrod, tried to take her arm to stop her. "Wait a minute, Boss," he pleaded. "You don't want to go in there."

But Bess insisted that she wanted to see Titia the Terrible. Bess didn't give a hoot about seeing Titia—but she was mad at Hank. Back at the Tumbling X, before starting for the carnival, Bess had thought that when Hank saw her in her new buckskin skirt with its fringed hem just brushing dimpled knees, he would realize that she really was a woman—and a darned attractive one, at that. But Hank's gaze hadn't even dropped to the white boots that nestled so snugly around her shapely calves.

So, now, at the carnival tent, Bess was angry enough to be obstinate and perverse. She said: "I'm going in, Hank Randall. You can come with me if you want to, or stay out. I don't care. That settles it."

Inside, the tent was packed with men and a few older women and some children. The lights were bright in here and the air was thick with smoke. Up on a small platform at the front of the tent, Titia the Terrible was just in the act of flinging a husky young cowboy flying over her shoulder. The crowd was roaring and bellowing its delight.

Bess Thatcher saw now, as they walked down a narrow aisle between benches, that Titia was not so terrible to look at. Titia had long red hair like orange fire. Her face was beautiful with full, soft lips and a small nose. Her eyes were very large and green as emeralds. And Titia was not ten feet tall. She was just about six. Under the spangled tights she was beautifully curved, a gorgeous figure of a woman.

Bess and Hank finally found two seats up near the front, right on the aisle. Behind them was a middle-aged homesteader and an impish-faced boy. The boy called out:

"Hey, Pop, look at the little half-pint gal what just came in! I'll bet Titia could toss her to hell-an'-gone!"

"Hush up!" the father commanded, "'fore I warm your britches!"

Bess and Hank turned and glowered at the boy.

The boy stuck out his tongue at them.

Bess and Hank turned back to watch the show just as a barker came out and started his ballyhoo.

"Lad-ees and gennelmun!" he hollered. "Is there anyone else in the audience who thinks he—or she—can stand up against the strength and skill of Titia the Terrible? There's twen-tee-five sil-vuh dollars waiting for the man, woman or child who can defeat her—"

The barker never finished his spiel. At that point the youngster, sitting directly behind Bess, jabbed her with a pin.

With a shrill squeal of dismay Bess leaped up like a suddenly released jack-in-the-box. Before she could wheel and bat the fresh kid, she heard the barker yell:

"Well, well, what have we here, Lad-ees and gennelmun? There's a little lassie with lots of courage. His voice was mocking, half-laughing. Here was a setup that should be good for a lot of laughs. . . .

And there are laughs, and sparkling, gay romance in Robert Turner's feature novel—"Who'll Tame the Carnival Siren?" March *Rangeland Romances*—published Jan. 26th.

THE EDITOR.

ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS While You Sit IN THE DARK!

Amazing Sensational New

SEANCE BOARD

Glows in the Dark

ARE YOU PSYCHIC? Whether you now are one of thousands who find delight in a Question and Answer Board, or whether you never before have tried your own alleged psychic forces, you must read the sensational offer below . . . you must make this generous NO-RISK TRIAL of the marvelous new GLOW IN THE DARK Gypsy Queen Seance Board that's become a rage . . . SIMPLY MAIL THE COUPON.

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HOW Does It Work?

The Seance Board should be wiped perfectly dry. The little table goes on top of Seance Board. Best operated with two or more people. Rest fingers lightly on little table; ask your questions aloud. Ordinarily, the little table begins moving in from a few seconds to three minutes.

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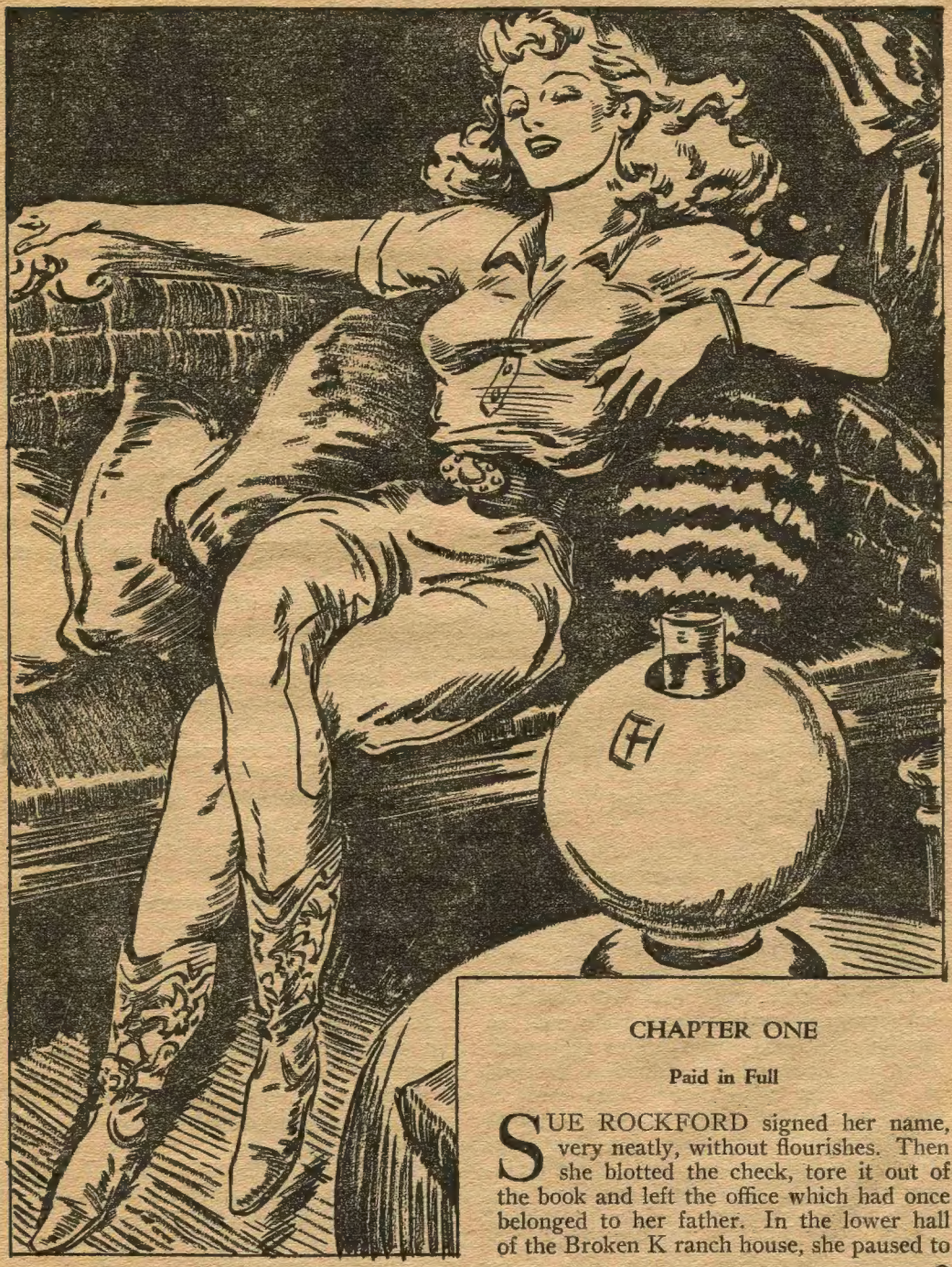
TEMPTRESS OF DREAM VALLEY

Rollicking Western Love Novel

By Marian O'Hearn

"You don't have to worry about me trying to kiss you," said Mike.

Beautiful Sue, owner of the Broken K, had to fire five foremen—because they all had made love to her. Now, the sixth, dashing Mike Gillen, assured her that he didn't like girls. And Sue wasn't sure whether or not —she wanted him to be like the others!



CHAPTER ONE

Paid in Full

SUE ROCKFORD signed her name, very neatly, without flourishes. Then she blotted the check, tore it out of the book and left the office which had once belonged to her father. In the lower hall of the Broken K ranch house, she paused to

glance into the living room and, as usual, was touched with a sense of pleasure.

One entire wall of the big room was composed of windows and opposite the windows an equally long mirror, reaching from floor to ceiling, caught up the light. The polished floor gleamed between fine rugs and the dark, graceful furniture was comfortable looking. A crimson-splashed chintz couch was the single spot of vivid color.

It was a lovely, restful place. And so was the entire Broken K house which Sue had remodeled a year before, following the death of her parents. She stopped seeing the pleasant room then and her thoughts dropped back into that period of cold, impossible shock. She had been in school in the East when the news of the tragedy came. A new pair of carriage horses had run away and overturned the buckboard near the top of Silver Mountain.

She had returned to Broken K and when the period of frozen stillness ended, decided to remain.

Soft, even footsteps crossed the hall, and as she turned, Helen Brown, the housekeeper, said: "Do you want me, ma'am?"

"Yes. Ask Mattie to bring the foreman."

Mrs. Brown's pleasant, middle-aged face became quiet, but she nodded and went toward the kitchen. A moment later the back door slammed distantly and Sue saw Mattie Wilson, the "hired girl" whom she was turning into a "maid," pass the windows at a lope. Her cap was hanging over one ear and the small, frilled white apron seemed to have no relationship to Mattie's angular body.

Sue grinned and, walking into the living room, sat down on the couch, stretching her slim legs out before her. The mirror gave back a nice picture, for Sue was lovely and everything about her had been planned as a background for that loveliness. She was a small girl, little more than five feet tall, but her finely proportioned body gave an illusion of added inches. Her legs were long and fine and her shoulders flat and straight. Her riding clothes were made of a fabulous tweed which, draping softly as silk, stressed every line. Her hair was brown, neither light nor dark, but containing rich earth tones and flashing highlights. Her eyes were the shade of hazel which could turn to blazing topaz, her skin defied definition for, in spite of its fairness, it held an odd golden tint. There was a hint of petulance on her full mouth, and with it, an open greediness for life which not even her firm, tilted chin could conceal.

The front knocker sounded and as Sue's glance lifted to the door, Lee Crane, the foreman, entered. He looked across the room at her, his face so quiet it was unreadable. She sat a little straighter as she realized that instead of the customary jeans and flannel shirt, he was wearing a dark suit and new-looking boots. The Stetson in his hand was an expensive one and there was a gun strapped against one thigh, although she did not permit the outfit to carry weapons except on range. He was a tall, rangy man with direct gray eyes and fair, sunburned hair.

When he waited without speaking, she said: "I sent for you because—"

"Yeah, I know." He crossed the room and looked down at her with eyes which had become metallic as the gun at his thigh. "You want to fire me."

Her head lifted, but she met his glance and said: "Yes. I'm glad you read my mind."

"It was easy, ma'am. I'm the fifth foreman you've had in a year and the whole country knows why they don't stay. They make love to you, and any cowpoke who thinks he's good enough for Sue Rockford is loco. Of course, a lot of folks think it's her fault—that they wouldn't start love-making unless she dared 'em into it."

Her eyes opened to wideness, but she swung to her feet and held out the check. "This covers your wages and an extra month's pay."

Crane grinned with the edges of his lips. "Then I guess you'll have to write another one—for just what's coming to me. I'm not taking gifts, ma'am."

"It's customary when—" She stopped her quick words and said: "If that's how you want it. I'll bring a new check in just a moment."

But as she turned to the door, Crane's hand shot out and closed on her arm. "I'll take my pay this way."

His gray eyes were thin, angry lines and he was still smiling with the edges of his lips. He pulled her close to him, and she could not break free or even move against the grip of his arms and his mouth.

When finally he let her go, he murmured: "Paid in full now, ma'am. Adios.

She watched him leave and then went on staring at the doorway through which he had passed, hearing the click of his heels on the steps, the chunk of his pony's hoofs as he rode away from the house. "Five foremen in a year, because they made love to you."

SHE lifted her hand and touched her bruised lips. *Was* it really her fault? . . . The doorway at which she had been staring was no longer empty. Someone was standing in the hall, just beyond the threshold, and as her eyes sharpened into focus, they met the gaze of a man with rust-colored hair and a silent face.

"Afternoon, ma'am," he said.

"Good afternoon." His features were blunt to the point of ugliness, and there was something faintly familiar about him which made her decide he was a waddie she had seen about the ranch. The Broken K outfit was big and new riders appeared frequently. She invited:

"Won't you come in?"

He entered and the room seemed smaller. Not that he was unusually big, but because of something which entered with him; as if an intangible part of him had reached out to fill the space around her. "It's his assurance," she decided. "He's always been completely sure of himself!"

He dropped his Stetson on the floor and sat down on the chintz-covered couch, meeting her gaze.

"You—did you want to see me?" she asked, suddenly almost uneasy.

"Yes, ma'am."

When he did not go on, a thin tinge of color moved into her face and she said: "Well, here I am.

He nodded and reaching into his breast pocket, took out cigarette makings. Keeping his glance on her, he began to roll a smoke. "I wondered if you knew about the Big Horn River."

"What about it?"

He blew smoke through his nostrils and let ashes drop on the rug. "Surprised someone hasn't told you by this time—the Big Horn's near its banks and the dam above Crazy Woman Canyon'll go, if we have another rain."

Sue made her eyes very level, for the uneasiness had increased. This man did not sound like a waddie speaking to his boss.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. We're having dry weather."

"Which is the time it usually rains. If there's rain, this whole district'll be flooded."

"The foreman's said nothing about it. But he's probably doing what he can," she said. And then remembered that the Broken K no longer had a foreman. Faint lines dug between her narrow brows and she wondered irritably why Crane had not mentioned the condition of the river. "Is that the reason you're here?" she demanded.

"Yes, ma'am. I figured you ought to send men to work on the banks. The other spreads are doing their share."

"And the Broken K isn't? That is—"

"No, ma'am."

Sue's frown deepened. This meant she had to have a foreman at once. But just where would she get one? Good tophands were not easy to find. Once more she became aware of the stranger's deeply blue, searching eyes and her glance sharpened. "How long have you been with this outfit?" she demanded.

"Ma'am? How long have I—what?"

"Worked here."

He grinned and his blunt mouth softened. "That's a hard question to answer, put that way."

"Why? But never mind. I have to have a foreman and the job's yours."

"Mine? But—"

Her eyes, bright as topaz now, tried to find the depths of his. "The foreman's job carries very good pay, as you know."

"Yeah," he said, his tone drawling. "It just seems to me that this is a funny way to hire a foreman."

"Not to me." She made her voice crisp and decisive. "You can take over tomorrow."

His eyes widened. "Don't you want to know my name and something about me? Most people know who's working for them."

"This is a big outfit. Will you see that some of the boys start for the river at once?"

His eyelids shuttered together and he waited for almost a full second before he

spoke. "If that's what you want, ma'am."

"Of course it is." She nodded and got pointedly to her feet. "Come to the house in the morning and we'll discuss anything you need to know. Don't make it too early."

"I won't," he murmured, and then added: "I never expected to be foreman of the Broken K."

Sue's lips parted, but she closed them tightly together and once more made it clear that she was waiting for him to go.

"I saw Crane leaving," he said. "That is, I saw him while he was here with you. I was in the hall a long time before you noticed me."

A sudden line of color stood out on her tilted chin and lifted to her cheeks, but before she could speak, he went on: "I can understand how you'd have trouble running a ranch. Men can't forget you're a girl and pretty. It's easier to forget you're their boss."

"Oh?" Her slim brows lifted even as her voice went up in scale.

"Yeah, but you needn't worry any longer. You won't have foreman trouble while I'm tophand. Not that kind, anyhow."

"I'm glad," she said, her voice still light and thin. "And I hope you're quite sure of that."

"I am. I never even see girls like you. At least, I don't see them as girls."

"Why not—" But she but off her words and murmured: "I'll expect you about ten in the morning."

"Afternoon, ma'am."

CHAPTER TWO

Fluff-Head Boss

SUE was having breakfast the next morning when Mattie Wilson, her cap more rakish than ever, said breathlessly: "There's a man here to see you—his name's Gillen.

"Thanks." But it was a full moment before she got up from the table. And then she walked very slowly to the living room.

She was wearing a morning dress of deep blue which brought out the golden tints of her skin.

Mike Gillen said: "Good morning, ma'am." His rusty hair looked very red. "I've been waiting more than an hour."

She smiled and said, almost casually: "I didn't know. Won't you please sit down?"

"I don't think so. Half the outfit has quit."

"Quit—why?"

"Lee Crane went right to work for the D-2 Bar and hired them away from us. They left word you could mail their checks."

Sue's cheeks warmed. "Then we'll simply have to get more riders. Maybe we can find some in town and send to Denver for others."

"It's not as simple as that. I told you the Big Horn River's dangerous—if we get another rain. And now, we've got a range fire on our hands. *Unless* we get rain, the Broken K may be in for serious damage. I sent the men we have to the fire and there's no one to help on the river. If rain gets here soon enough, it'll take care of the fire."

"And if it does, the range will be flooded. Do you think it may be really serious?"

"Yeah. Serious enough so that you'd better get out fast, once the river breaks over."

She stared at him, trying to visualize the situation. Destructive fires on one side and the threat of the river on the other. "Fire and flood," she murmured. "Sounds dramatic."

"It would, to you. Maybe you can't even believe it, because this ranch is just something to play with. But either one can mean actual starvation to a lot of other people."

Sue's eyes widened and turned to brilliant topaz. "I'm sorry that's your opinion of me," she said, her words clipped and level.

"Better not fire me right this minute," he broke in. "You're really going to need a foreman in the next few days. I'll send to town and see what riders we can pick up." He was turning to the door and once more she saw the look of solid power about his big body.

"No," she said quickly, "if we're that short-handed, I'll go to town."

He let his blue glance run over her. Then she came back across the room. "Sorry, ma'am," he said, "but I guess this is the only way to do it."

Deliberately he took her into his arms.

And for the first time in her life, Sue felt actually helpless. Not merely because of Gillen's size, but because of the almost tangible force which he emanated. As he bent his head to kiss her, she saw the bluntness of his mouth and chin, the deep blue of his eyes. His kiss was blunt, too.

She did not attempt to escape until the kiss ended and his arms dropped. Her breath was pressing against the walls of her throat, but she managed to say: "I think you told me I'd have no more foreman trouble—that you didn't even see girls like me."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"But it wasn't true."

"It was true—" his eyes narrowed. "I want to be fired, ma'am. It's bad enough to work for a woman, but when she starts hiring the outfit, it's hopeless. If you'll just give me my time, I'll ride."

The hard beating of her heart eased, but it was still not easy to speak and as she stared back at him, her cheeks turned to fire. He had only kissed her to get rid of his job—to be through with her and the Broken K.

"A moment ago you told me I was going to need a foreman badly."

"Sure," he said, drawling his words. "But I want to get away from this spread."

Her lips moved, but it was only after a full second that her words sounded. "Ive no intention of firing you. You're still foreman."

His deeply blue eyes met hers. "I can quit."

"I can't stop that—if you're afraid."

He grinned and his blunt mouth changed so that it seemed warm. "You're right, ma'am. I'm still foreman."

"Then, as I said, "I'll go to town for men."

"Yeah," he murmured. "As you said."

"You won't be fired—even for kissing me again," she said, her words so swift that their sound was blurred.

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was going to say that as long as I'm not leaving, I hope you'll forget what happened. I was telling the truth when I said you'd never have to worry about me."

"I believed you, then. Now, I'm not sure."

"You can be. I didn't want to kiss you."

"You didn't want to—" She closed her lips so quickly that the echo of her words lingered in the air. "Then we needn't talk about it any more. Good morning."

She went out of the room and across the hall to the stairs. And before the long mirror in her room, began to take off the trailing morning dress.

Mike Gillen's eyes were the bluest she had ever seen. And it was hard to remember that his face was almost as ugly.

She got into the tweed riding clothes and pulled a brown hat down over her face. Outside, the eastern sky was dark with smoke and as the breeze whipped its acrid smell into her nostrils, she paused uneasily, thinking of what a bad range fire might mean.

She went on at last, conscious of the stillness of the yard, but at the corrals a wrangler came hastily from the enclosure. "Just going to saddle and bring him up to the house, ma'am."

"I could have saddled myself, we're so short-handed—"

"Yeah. But Mike Gillen said nothing ought to interfere with your service. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

WARMTH blazed up her throat into her face and she moved sharply away. Returning to the house, she sat on the porch to wait, and remembered Gillen's arms holding her against his big body. But he had done that only so that she would fire him.

The wrangler led her pony to the steps. As she got into the saddle, he said: "Better stick to the main trail, ma'am. The fire's spreading."

"Thanks." She cantered through the gates to the trail, but half a mile away, drew in and looked toward the thick yellow clouds of smoke lifting to the sky.

Abruptly she sent her pony off the trail and pushed him into a long, fast gait. A voice was shouting orders somewhere ahead and she saw wraith-like figures moving with strange deliberate steadiness, as if determined not to fall back.

A tall man broke through the wall of smoke and moved toward Sue at a run. Without speaking he caught her mount's headleather and wheeled him.

"Wait," she cried, "I want to see how bad it is."

He continued to lead her pony toward the trail and she stiffened with sudden anger. But as her lips parted over swift words, he stopped and released her horse.

"Now keep away from here," he said, turning so that she could see his smoke-blackened face.

It was Lee Crane and anger flickered through her. "You must have arranged to go to the Bar 2 D long before yesterday," she said.

His red-rimmed eyes looked up at her and through her. "No, ma'am. I got the job after I left the Broken K, if it makes any difference. You'd better stay away from this place, because the wind's shifting and it'd be easy to get caught. Your outfit got here a couple of hours ago."

Sue smiled too brightly. "You mean those you didn't hire away from me."

"I didn't hire 'em away. They wanted to leave."

"Isn't it strange they didn't think of leaving before? Had you been wanting to leave, too?"

"No, ma'am, I intended to stay on the Broken K. It's a great ranch and—"

"And?" she insisted.

His mouth twisted and his eyes narrowed. "There's you, of course."

"I see." She lifted the reins. "Sorry you stopped me. I'll have to circle back from farther down trail. Adios."

"Hold on." He reached for her pony's cheek strap again and not even the mask of soot could hide the sudden whiteness of his lean face. "You can't do it—"

"How'll you stop me?"

He started at her, his hand tightening on the leather. "Maybe I won't, but I just remembered I've got some wages coming from the Broken K."

"Which you refused."

"No, ma'am. I said I'd take the pay in my own way and maybe part of it's still due." He let go of the pony's leather, pulled the reins from her hands and lifted her out of the saddle.

"See," he said, holding her in his arms. "You're not the owner of the Broken K now. You're just a girl—a pretty, self-loving girl who can't think of anything except herself."

"Put me down," she said, her voice level and her chin set.

"After I've collected the rest of my pay."

He was bending over her, searching for her mouth and, knowing she could not escape, she said: "What do you think this settles? It can't hurt me, because you grab me and kiss me. It just doesn't mean anything."

His gray glance caught hers. "I don't want to hurt you. I just feel like kissing you—no other reason for kissing a girl." And his mouth took hers. His lips tasted of smoke and youth and bitterness. But they also held something else; something which broke through her anger. He really was like part of the earth, this man. Strong as the earth was strong.

He ended the kiss and lifted her back into the saddle. "Guess that closes the account," he said. "Sorry I got your face dirty." And, heeling about, he strode back across range.

The thickening folds of smoke hid him from sight. Taking out her pocket handkerchief, Sue scrubbed at her mouth.

As she rode down-trail again, her face was very still. Lee Crane had called her self-loving, but his lips had been warm on hers.

She nudged her pony into a fast canter. In Red Bow she got down before the grimy building which housed the employment agency. Inside, a paunchy man pulled himself to his feet and said:

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm Sue Rockford of the Broken K, and I need riders. Have you any listed?"

He hesitated and shifted his wad of tobacco. "Well," he said, avoiding her eyes. "There's some, I guess. But, ma'am—" he broke off, darted a glance at her and then stared over her head. "Waddies has gotten kind of funny these days."

Sue's eyes opened to wideness. "What of it? The Broken Kay pays the best salaries in the county. Certainly living conditions are better than on most other spreads."

"Yeah, I know," he mumbled. "Well, I'll see. A few of the boys're out back. Wait a minute." He opened a door into a room where half a dozen men were huddled about a rickety table playing poker. They put down their hands and moved forward with their eyes on the girl.

"The Broken Kay needs riders," the employment agent announced. "Good pay. Anyone interested?"

THEIR glaces swung over her and shifted away while the silence became so deep that she could hear her own light breathing. "Sorry, ma'am," the agent said. "Don't know what the boys are looking for."

"But I need men!" Her voice lifted to thinness. "They know I pay better than anyone in the county."

None of the riders spoke and the agent shrugged. And then Sue noticed the chilliness of their eyes. Their glances were touches of ice and she stared back at them in surprise.

"I'll give double pay," she said, her words flat with anger. "There are prairie fires threatening the ranch and we may have trouble with the Big Horn River—or maybe none of you heard about that!"

The first of the waddies turned his head to look at the others. "Double pay, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you want it?"

"Yeah, I guess so—that's good money," he said. The others nodded.

"Then start for the ranch at once," she told them. "Mike Gillen's the foreman."

They went out without speaking or glancing at her, and she turned to the agent with swift words breaking from her lips. But forcing them back she murmured: "Thank you. Good day."

When she got into the saddle the new Broken K waddies were already a block away and she held her mount to a walk so as not to overtake them. At the corner her glance touched the windows of Green's Department Store and turning in to the hitch-rack, she got down. Going directly to the second floor, the manager of the women's department hurried to meet her. "I'll see if your dress is finished, Miss Rockford. I thought it was to be done tomorrow, but—"

She bustled away and Sue noticed a clerk showing dresses to a tall, angular woman. The woman murmured something which sounded despairing and the clerk said wearily, "But Miss Rockford's things are made to order! You can't get them ready made."

Sue's glance swept over the girl whose back was toward her. And then she knew.

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It was Mattie Wilson! She started forward, but stopped again, deciding she would talk to Mattie at the ranch.

But at that moment, the girl turned and their eyes met. Mattie's head lifted defiantly and her lips tightened. Clutchng the dress she had been inspecting in big, bony hands, she strode toward her mistress. "Howdy, ma'am," she said, her tone loud. "Isn't it strange we both come here for our clothes?"

Sue said very softly: "Yes. But if you can't find what you want, perhaps I have some things you'll like."

Mattie flushed. "That's kind of you, ma'am. But even if I'd take 'em, you know they wouldn't fit."

Sue felt faintly ridiculous. "Maybe not. I hope you get what you want."

She turned away and the department manager rushed up, explaining apologetically, that the dress would not be ready for twenty-four hours. As Sue started downstairs, she had another glimpse of Mattie who was no longer inspecting clothes, but staring after her with hard eyes.

"That," she told herself, "is sort of funny. She's the one who is mad!" As she got into the saddle, she was grinning at the picture of Mattie seeking finery for her big, flesh-lacking bones. "Still," she told herself, "she's got an attractive face. If she knew what to do about her figure, she wouldn't be bad at all."

It was well past noon when she entered the Broken K and, as she rode to the corrals, saw a strange pony waiting before the bunkshed. Voices were coming from behind the closed doors, which was strange, considering that the range fire was not yet under control.

She stepped down and, as her hand lifted to knock, the door opened. Mike Gillen looked out at her, his blue eyes strained and rimmed with red. "Hold it," he said, closing the door behind him. "We'd better do our talking in private."

"What's the matter? You sound as if—"

"There's plenty of trouble piling up, ma'am. Three of our boys are out with smoke poisoning. That's the doctor's pony."

"Are they in bad shape? If they need nursing—"

"Mrs. Brown's looking after them," he said. "Still that isn't too bad. You still have Mattie to wait on you."

Sue's eyes, growing wide, lost their topaz blaze and her lips broke apart. But she did not speak until they reached the house, when she said "I'm glad we got those new men. I suppose they showed up?"

"Yeah," his voice flattened. "They showed up, but I'm afraid they won't be much good. They're a cocky lot and think they're going to pick their own jobs." The sound of racing hoofs pulled his glance toward the gates and, as a rider shot into the yard, his face set. "There's one of 'em now. See you later, ma'am."

He strode across the yard to intercept the waddie and said. "Pull in."

The rider stopped and stared through heavy lids. "Yeah?"

"What're you doing back here? You were sent to the range."

"Came for a fresh pony. This cayuse is all in."

"He wouldn't be, if you didn't ride him to death. Besides, you don't need a horse to fight a fire."

"Who says so? Any time I swing a shovel, I'll know it. I hired on as a cowhand, not a ditch-digger—"

"You'll dig until the fire's stopped," Gillen cut in.

"Will I?" The waddie dropped the reins and slid from the saddle. "I told you when I came that I didn't like the Broken K nor the fluff-head who owns it. She's—"

A hard fist, moving only a few inches, stopped the words and the man staggered back before he sat down on the ground. Sue's glance found Gillen's face and then she went quickly into the house.

At six o'clock Mattie had not returned and she lighted the living room lamps, telling herself, "I think I'll make a trip to Denver and hire a maid who knows what it's all about."

When the hands of the clock pointed to six-thirty, she went into the kitchen and made scrambled eggs and toast. Sitting at the kitchen table to eat, the feeling of aloneness swept back over her, for the big house was very still. Finishing the meal hurriedly, she went up to her room. She tried to read, but the printed words were a jumble before her eyes. Finally putting out the lamp, she tried to sleep. But a picture of Lee Crane formed against the dark-

ness and she remembered his hard lips on hers. If she hadn't fired him . . . Restlessly, she cut off the thought, only to recall Mike Gillen's eyes looking coldly down at her as he spoke of the men overcome while fighting the fire. He had said girls like her meant nothing to him and that he hadn't wanted to kiss her.

Abruptly Sue sat up in bed, her eyes wide before the darkness. He had told the truth—had meant every one of his words!

CHAPTER THREE

Holiday for Heartbreak

SUE stirred in her sleep and said to the blunt-faced man of whom she was dreaming: "I hired you to be foreman of the Broken K and not to strip my life down to emptiness."

"Miss Rockford—ma'am!"

The words came from a distance and were accompanied by a knocking sound. The dream broke and she sat up, shivering. Someone was pounding at her door and she reached for the matches on the bedside table, calling, "Just a minute!"

Pulling on a long chiffon robe of dull gold and pushing her feet into the blue mules waiting beside the bed, she ran across the room.

When she jerked open the door, Mike Gillen said "You all right, ma'am?"

"Of course—why shouldn't I be? Why, what's the matter? That smells like smoke!"

"It is smoke." His eyes were unreadable and remote, his mouth very blunt. "There was a fire under your side veranda—someone tried to burn the place down. I saw it when I got in from the range a few minutes ago."

"Tried to burn the place down?" The words were flat, unreal sounds. "But that's crazy! It couldn't—"

"Better come and look, ma'am. I put a couple of the boys to work and it's about out."

"I can't believe it," she repeated, not thinking of her words, but of him and the new quality of remoteness on his face.

Hurrying past him into the hall, she wrapped the robe of triple chiffon tightly about her slim body. And when she paused on the stair landing to look back at him, he said:

"I'm coming, ma'am."

The side veranda had been emptied of furniture and two men were still dousing the foundation and railing with water. They were working by the light of a row of lanterns on the porch floor and as the girl stepped into the glare, they looked up at her. And both of them straightened and stopped. Their eyes ran over her; over the hair falling about her shoulders, over the golden chiffon robe and the blue slippers which showed her small, bare insteps. The stares were bold.

"Yes, I see," she said hastily, as Mike Gillen reached her. "It does look as if someone wanted to burn the house." And she turned back into the darkness.

"Maybe I'd better stick around," the foreman said, following her up the steps. "I don't like the looks of that—somebody must hate you enough to kill you."

"Why should they hate me? And if they really wanted to kill, why a fire? There's always a chance of escaping from a burning house."

"I don't know," he said the words slowly. "Maybe whoever started the fire could tell us."

She was silent a moment; then: "If we're going to wait, we might as well be comfortable," she said, and as she led the way into the living room her pulse lifted until she could feel each beat striking the flesh above it.

Gillen sat down in a chair near the couch. "You needn't stay up. I'll stick around for a while and then leave one of the boys on guard."

"If this fire was set, maybe the range fire was, too," she said. "And that means we have a maniac in the district."

"I don't think the range fire was set. It started in the usual way—a spark from dry brush or a cigarette."

Sue saw her image in the mirror; saw that she was softly curved with a lovely face and scarlet mouth. The chiffon robe clung to her slim legs and shoulders. Her rich hair caught the light.

"Would you like some coffee?" She let her lips curve over the words, and her hazel eyes were deep, as if the hunger of her mouth had turned into flame behind them.

"No, thanks."

He might have been speaking to another man. Or to an old and unattractive woman. Nothing in his voice or attitude said that she was desirable.

"Since you think someone tried to set fire to the house because they hated me, maybe you've an idea of who it was."

His blue gaze was so dark that it seemed black in the lamp-light. "I don't know, but my guess would be some hombre who used to work for you—nursing a grudge."

She did not speak at once. She was remembering Lee Crane. "I won't believe that," she told herself. "He couldn't do it. He just isn't capable of such a thing."

"I think," she said aloud, "that I'll go to bed."

"Good idea, ma'am." He sounded polite and patient. "I'll stay for a while."

She hesitated and moving toward him, swayed close as she put out her hand. "Good night and thank you. I'm glad you were here."

He looked down at her hand and his jaws set. "Good night." His grip tightened and he added: "If you'll really feel better, I'll kiss you."

"You'll—" Her scarlet lips remained apart after her words broke off, and her widening eyes blazed.

"Yeah," he said, as if in answer to a question. "You want me to kiss you to prove something. And I don't mind, because getting fired wouldn't bother me."

She tried to pull her hand free, but he held it. "I'm sorry you misunderstood me. If you hadn't discovered the fire—"

"Someone else would have seen it in plenty time. This house wouldn't burn easily and you know it. Now, since you have to prove that every man wants you, we'll get it settled."

Still holding her hand, he bent his head and kissed her, without attempting to take her into his arms. As his blunt lips crushed down on hers, the breath halted in her throat and made her heart lift into a painful beat. And that almost tangible quality of strength spread out and surrounded her. The touch of his mouth was sensitive and, finally, fleetingly tender.

His mouth left hers and his hands closed briefly on her arms. "Good night, ma'am," he said softly.

She started for the door, walking unsteadily and trying to lift her head; trying to pretend that her blood was not pounding violently through her veins. Something moved just ahead, and as her vision cleared she saw Mattie. The girl looked taller and more angular than ever. And her eyes seemed to burn from her thin face.

"Good evening," Sue managed to find an almost level tone. "I didn't know you had today off, but I'll talk to you in the morning."

Mattie said nothing and Sue continued on to the stairs, but the memory of the girl's hard, bright eyes clung to her until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cupid's Foreman

THE room was splashed with sunlight when Sue awoke the next morning and, as she stepped out of bed, the housekeeper entered. "Would you like breadfast served here?" she asked. "After what happened last night, you probably don't feel like getting up."

"I'll be down as soon as I'm dressed. But where's Mattie? I thought this was part of her job."

Mrs. Brown hesitated: "She's still asleep. I hated to make her up. She was probably frightened almost to death last night."

Sue pushed her feet into slippers and half an hour later, glowing from her bath, was dressed in a trailing affair of violet while a bronze ribbon held back her curls and matched the tone of her slippers. When she entered the dining room, Mattie came through the swinging door from the kitchen, and her eyes still seeming too bright for her thin face.

"Shall I serve you now?"

"Yes." Sue sat down. "I didn't know yesterday was your day off. I'd like to be told about such things in the future."

The girl turned slowly about and standing with her back to the door, gazed steadily at the owner of the Broken K. "It wasn't my day off. I just took it. I—had to get away from this place."

"Why?" Sue demanded, questioning the girl's tone rather than her words.

"I just had to."

When Sue did not speak, Mattie lifted her hand to the swinging door, dropped it again and said "You can fire me, I guess. It's all right with me."

"But I—" Sue's head lifted, for another voice was ringing through her thoughts. A voice saying, *I kissed you because I wanted to be fired.* She met Mattie's eyes. "I hadn't thought of firing you. Now will you please bring my breakfast?"

She drank a cup of coffee and pushed back her chair. But as she started from the room, the front door knocker clanged.

Mattie charged past her into the hall. "Howdy," she said loudly and gaily, as she opened the door. "You look done in." There was a new quality in her voice. A lightness and a lilt.

"Morning." Lee Crane stepped into the hall and smiled at the hired girl. "You sure don't look 'done in.' You're bright as the sun, Mattie, and just as pretty."

He saw Sue, then, and stepped past Mattie. "Good morning, ma'am. I'd like to talk to you." He looked gray with exhaustion and there were lines about his smoke-reddened eyes.

"We'll go into the living room," she said and when he was seated, his long legs sprawled awkwardly, she asked: "Is the fire any worse?"

"No, we've got it checked, I think. Looked that way anyhow, when I left."

"Do you mean you've been working all night?"

Points of laughter sprang to the surface of his gray eyes. "Yeah. A range fire won't wait. Mike Gillen's still there and so are most of his boys. He told me someone tried to set fire to this house last night."

She nodded. "It seemed like that."

"Ma'am," he leaned forward and his gray eyes caught her glance, "that may mean real trouble for you, because fire bugs aren't easy to catch, and if you'd like me to come back, I'm sorry. You're short of hands and—I'm sorry for what happened on the range. As sorry as I am about the reason I left the Broken K."

"But you just went to the Bar D 2! If you came back now—"

"I'm ready, if you want me. The Bar D 2'll probably be sore, but that's not important. You've got to have men to run this ranch and protect you."

"Lee," she, too, learned forward. And she smiled, her scarlet mouth curving into softness, as she met his eyes. "I'll never forget your offer to return. I shouldn't have fired you and you're a lot bigger than I."

His lean jaws flushed. "Let's skip that part of it. I'll notify the boss."

"But maybe you have a better job there. Gillen's foreman now and it wouldn't be fair to demote him. I couldn't ask you to come back as a waddie."

"I don't mind, ma'am. Not when you need me."

"I don't need you that much. I got half a dozen men in town yesterday."

His lips set firmly together and the dark flush on his jaws deepened. "Yeah," he murmured, "but you've lost the rest of your outfit. Gillen told me, a while ago, that these new hombres have been bragging they're getting double pay. It made the old riders so sore they wouldn't even ask for more money—just quit."

Sue straightened so swiftly that she could feel her flesh go rigid. "They've gone—all the regular hands?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's why I came. Do you want me to start today?"

She looked at him with a new sharpness and warmth stung at her eyes, for his face could not hide the truth. She meant more to him than his masculine pride; more than anything he might gain by remaining away from her.

"No," she said quickly. "I can't let you come back. I want you to stay where you are. It's—better."

His lips moved into a faint grin and she remembered how edged and hard they had been when he kissed her. "If you're thinking I might—bother you again, you can stop worrying. All I want to do is see that you're safe."

"That's why I can't let you come back." And then she was on her feet, almost running from him, so he would not see the tears which were spilling through her lashes.

In her room she went to the window and watched him go down the steps to his pony. As he got up a woman's voice called: "Wait—please wait!"

Mattie flew down to him and, as she stood beside his pony, he pulled off his Stetson. "You shouldn't come here," the

hired girl's tense voice carried clearly to the open window. "After what happened to you on this ranch, you ought to stay away."

Crane's face went blank with surprise, but he grinned, "I probably will, after this. But don't worry about me, Mattie."

"I do, though. Promise me you won't come back."

Lee chuckled. "I might have to, for one reason or another. We'll talk it over next time. Adios." He sent his pony across the yard and the tall, angular girl, standing rigidly before the steps, watched him out of sight.

There were sharp lines between Sue's brows as she began to dress and she thought uneasily of the way in which Mattie had looked at her the night before. Even as she went downstairs and out to the bunkshed, she could not forget the sound of the girl's voice telling Lee Crane to stay away from the Broken K. Maybe . . .

Hoofs chunked toward her from the gates and Mike Gillen said: "Morning, ma'am. Glad you're here."

As he drew in she turned to face him. "I heard all the regular waddies have quit."

"Yeah," he slid to the ground and looked down at her with eyes which were sunken and rimmed from sleeplessness. "We've got just the six new boys you hired. No more."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize—"

"If you'd told me you had offered them double-pay, I'd have seen that the old hands got the same. Couldn't be any other way." He paused, squinted at the northern sky and reached into his breast pocket for cigarette makings. "Noticed the weather today, ma'am?"

Her glance also lifted to the sky and for the first time she noticed that in spite of the sun, it was a faint, leaden gray. "It can't mean anything—this early. Later, it'll brighten."

"Maybe. But now that we've got the fire licked, hope we don't have something worse on our hands. We'll have to find men." His gazed dropped to her face again and it was coolly quiet. This man could not have held her in his arms and kissed her with lips which had turned surprisingly tender. But thin, bright color lifted into her cheeks as she remembered the manner in which he had kissed her. "This time I'll do the hiring, but since you started paying double, we may have to go on with it."

"Give them anything that's necessary."

"Yeah," he drawled, his eyes once more on the sky. "I was figuring that." He slipped his pony's reins over his arm and crossed the yard. . . .

That night there was no twilight. The sky, which had been faintly overcast all day, merely turned black. And with the darkness came a spatter of rain. A few minute later, Sue heard hoofs moving out of the yard. And glancing through the windows, she saw Gillen and several men heading for the trail. "They're going to the river," she told herself, and felt alone.

Mattie served her supper in heavy silence and afterwards Sue was conscious of the complete quiet of the house and yard. She went to bed early and tried not to think of the threat of a storm. The rain had stopped, but if it started again . . .

SHE slept uneasily and a shrill, piercing scream awakened her. Still partially asleep, she sprang out of bed and ran for the door in her nightgown, forgetting robe or slippers. The scream came again from somewhere downstairs, and then there was silence. In the lower hall, she heard men's voices at the rear of the house and turned to the kitchen.

Someone was sobbing. A woman. She gropped for the kitchen lamp and striking a match with unsteady hands, opened the back door. Two men were holding a tall, angular girl between them, and as Sue appeared, the sobbing stopped.

"What's happening?"

"Nothing much, ma'am," Mike Gillen said, his voice heavy and tired. "Looks like we caught our firebug. I decided to take a look around after I came back from the river and heard someone slip out from the house. I waited and saw her start the fire."

"Oh." Sue's voice also became weary. "Mattie?"

"Yeah."

"Bring her in."

Mattie, still between Gillen and one of the new waddies, came into the kitchen with her face streaked and her eyes swollen.

She stood stiffly erect facing Sue, who said: "We might as well sit down."

She pulled out a kitchen chair and the men sat on the opposite side of the table.

Mattie remained standing, her eyes fixed on her mistress. "All right," she said, her voice grating, "they caught me and I can be sent to jail. Well, I don't care. I wish I'd been able to really burn this place up! I didn't really want to kill you. I thought you'd get out alive . . . But why should you have all this—" Her hand jerked to indicate the ranch house and the Broken K. "You used it to make Lee Crane fall in love with you, when you got around to noticing him. I've known and loved him all my life, but once you looked at him, he forgot I was on earth."

Sue's face felt cold, as if all the blood had left it. She sat very still. And as Mattie's voice died, Sue could not speak. Silence dropped over the kitchen and through it she could still hear the wild grief of the other girl's words: "I've known and loved Lee Crane all my life."

Yes, it had been simple enough for the pretty owner of the Broken K to make him forget Mattie, the "hired girl."

Mike Gillen stirred. "Well, ma'am, what do you want to do? I can send for the sheriff or take her in to—his office." Mike Gillen stood up.

Sue turned her head slowly to look at him. "We don't need a sheriff," she said. "And there's nothing to be done except go to bed."

His blue gaze dug into her eyes for almost a full second before he nodded and got to his feet. "Maybe you're right, ma'am. Good night."

He and the waddie went out and Sue said: "We'll have hot milk and some sleep, Mattie. I'll fix it."

The other girl watched blankly while Sue brought milk from the cooler and placed it in a pan to heat. Pouring it into glasses, she put them down on the table and said: "Better drink it."

Mattie approached slowly. "I expected you to have me arrested."

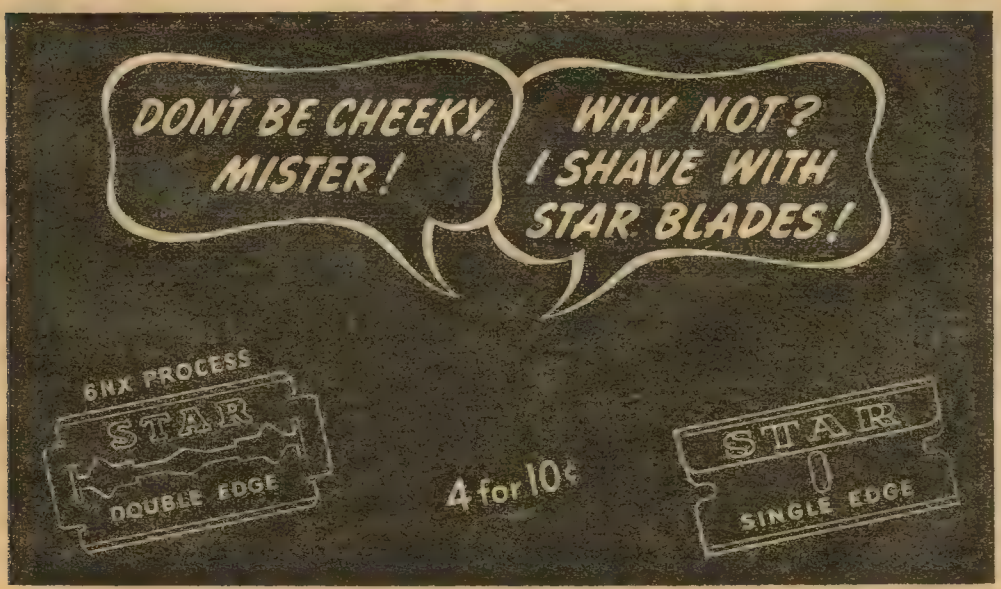
"Why should I?" Sue demanded. "You were right. I didn't know how you felt about Lee Crane, but it was my fault anyhow. Mattie, if you really want him, I'm going to see that you get him. Tomorrow, we'll go shopping because I know exactly the kind of clothes you need. When we've gotten you outfitted, Crane'll wonder why he ever looked at me."

The thin girl's eyes were unbelieving: "Then you think he might? That I—"

Sue grinned. "Every girl can be desirable if she knows how. You've got a nice face and you'd look graceful enough with the right clothes."

"Ma'am!" Mattie's voice was hushed. "Lisen to that. It's rain. A real rain!"

An icy tingle fled down Sue's spine. The



rain had come. A roaring torrent of it.

"I'm going to get dressed," she said, and raced out of the kitchen.

Upstairs she pulled on old riding clothes and heavy boots, caught up a slicker and jerked it over her shoulders.

But when she returned to the kitchen, Mattie was gone and she hurried to the front door. As she opened it, she heard the uproar in the yard even through the heavy sound of the rain. Men were calling to each other in tightened voices, horses were stamping and lanterns showed faintly.

She stepped out into the deluge, but a voice snapped from the darkness "Hold it, ma'am." She stopped and only afterwards realized that Mike Gillen's tones had always been able to halt her.

He came up the steps and drew her back into the shelter of the porch. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the river."

"No, you're not." His hand closed on her arm. "Come inside—"

He broke off as a single pony shot across the yard, running at top speed. "Now, who—" he said, "is hightailing it out like that?"

Suddenly Sue knew. And for a moment resentment flashed through her. "It's Mattie," she said quietly. "She's gone to help and that's what I want to do."

HE OPENED the door and propelled her firmly through it. "That's crazy," he said and led her into the living room. "Listen to me. That river's going to break and the thing for you to do is start for town. Take a train to Denver and stay there until the worst of it's over. This spread won't do too badly. It may be flooded but the house is on high ground, so leave it open for the people who'll stream up this way from places in the lowlands and close to the river. There'll be kids and old people who'll need shelter and food. They can use it while you're gone—"

"Do you think," she thrust her words angrily through his, "that I'm going to run off and be comfortable while others are driven out of their homes? You speak of kids and old people needing some place to go. Well, I'll be here to help them. Maybe you're right about not going to the river, because this is where I belong and where I'll stay. If people need food, I'll cook it."

He released her and stepped back, his blue gaze digging into her eyes. "I think you mean that."

"Why shouldn't I? This isn't a time for speeches."

"No, it's not. And I've got to catch up with the boys. But maybe it's the only time to kind of set things right, too. Sue," he touched her again, but diffidently now, gently. "I've been lying to you."

"Lying?"

"Yeah." He was close to her, suddenly. "That stuff about kissing you to wake you up and so on. Men aren't like that, ma'am. I kissed you because I love you."

Her eyes went wide and turned into blazing topaz. "Say that again," she told him, the words so swift that they were blurred by her breath. "Maybe then I'll believe it."

"You can believe it. I've loved you for a long time. I'm not a Broken K waddie and never was—I have a spread thirty miles east of here and I've seen you in town and other places. Once I'd seen you I couldn't get you out of my mind, so when the river started acting up, it seemed like a good excuse for calling and—"

"And you saw me with Lee Crane."

"Yeah. I knew it was hitting him pretty hard and I knew you enjoyed having men fall in love with you. But when you offered me the foreman's job, I figured maybe—"

"What?" she demanded.

"That if you ever cared enough for a man you'd change."

"You were right," her voice was low and she went very quietly into his arms. "But part of me didn't need to change—the part that was waiting for you."

"I found that out tonight," he said. And his blunt mouth claimed hers and covered it with tenderness. She clung to him, her lips no longer greedy as they responded to his kiss for she had found everything she had been seeking. Not even the threat of the flood was important now. She would simply work it out with the other ranchers of the district and wait here to help her neighbors. After that, Mike Gillen would come back to her.

THE END

Pin-Up Girl

The heart this cowgirl gay and pert
Carves boldly on a tree,
Tells all the world she wants to flirt

.....

To finish the limerick in this February contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this February contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on January 25th, 1945. The judges' decision will be final. . . . See announcement of winner of November contest on page 73.

♥ ♥ THE LOOM SINGS OF LOVE

By Jane Hardey

Luscious Della had to make a dashing rancher fall in love with her—before he learned that her sophisticated sister was leaving him to elope with a shiftless cowhand.

HER skilled young hands sent the shuttle on its last trip through the red and white warp, she tamped the row firmly into place, and the carpet was done. Della Riser straightened her tired back and regarded her work proudly.

It was not hers. She had made the twenty yards for her sister, Lianne. It had been love's labor. Lianne was twenty-one and would soon be married and gone. Then Del could start one of her own for her marriage chest.

It would have to be pretty to match the fine, three-room house Lea Stratton was building this spring, in a beech cove two sections to the north. For her heart had made its choice. Lea didn't know it yet.

But now, with Lianne's carpet done, with the rags sewn and balled for her own, Del was going to let him know how the wind set for her. A girl had to make some kind of a sign, and when the carpet was done was the time she had set.

Though her tall, golden-haired sister had many beaux, Del had no idea which one she would marry. It might be Otis Johns, the new hired man. Del had seen Lianne slipping out to walk in the dusk with him, to return starry-eyed.

Pa would raise hob if he found out. And find out he would if it was real love, for Lianne usually had her way. Well it was time she was thinking of having a home of her own. Del's level gray eyes, with the long silky lashes that matched her dark hair, were glowing with the steady light of her own secret love as she cut the warp ends and tied them into a knotted fringe. Then she darted to the door.

"Lianne! Aunt Electra! It's done. The carpet's all finished. Come and help me lift it from the loom."

They hurried in. Lianne helped with her strong, shapely arms. And Pa's maiden sister, Electra, scrawny and flat-chested, also helped. A touch of her black, low-heeled shoe sent the roll across the room to the opposite wall, leaving a hit-and-miss web of bright new colors in its wake.

"Lawzee but it's pretty, Del," she gave unstinted praise.

But Lianne asked, "Do you think so? Would green warp have been prettier than the red?"

"Child, no. If you want it to fade quickly, wish it was green warp. It can turn pale so fast you wouldn't believe your eyes. Now who'd a thought that blue dress would a worked in so handsome?"

Del, on her knees to cut away any knots, caressed it with loving fingers. "I wish mine was ready," she whispered wistfully. "I wish it was done this very minute."

Lianne's high laugh was amused. "A seventeen-year-old wanting a carpet. Wait till you get a man on the string, can't you?"

Del's small dark head lifted. "I've got a man on my string," she stated. "I've already picked him out. I'm—just waiting."

Lianne's big blue eyes showed interest.

"Sure," he said, "like this. . . . "

"Oh. Our sly little mouse. And who is it, pray?"

Before Del had to give an evasive answer Ethan Riser's spare frame appeared in the doorway. Behind him, a head taller, was Lea Stratton, peering in at them.

"Pa. Lea. Del's got a mysterious beau," Lianne shrilled. "Make her tell who it is."

Del thought the fire must burst from her cheeks when she saw Lea's eyes upon her, showing concern. Pa saved the day by kicking off his boots and stepping onto the new carpet, capering around in his sock feet and cutting a ludicrous figure in his brown work clothes. "Come try it out, Lea. Feels right bright to the foot."

Del laughed in merry relief, and made as if to snip his hand-knitted socks with her scissors.

"Hi there, you sassy minx!" he pretended to scold. Then his dance changed to slow, approving steps. "Lianne, it seems a shame to sneak off to another man's house with this fine carpet. Reckon I'll take out a mortgage and keep it right here." His faded eyes, in his small, weather-seamed face, traveled from Lianne to Lea, joining them together. "But I guess it won't go far. Not with Lea askin' to come over to talk with you Sunday, Daughter."

Del, still on her knees, felt her heart kneel beside her. Dear God! Had Pa set his mind on Lea and Lianne before she had a chance? She wanted to stand up there before them all and claim him, come bad, come good. She had the will—but not the courage. She had no assurance that Lea cared for her. And look at him now. He was seeing only Lianne. His eyes were filled with her beautiful, full-blown womanhood. She was sure he didn't know when she slipped away to bed.

For Del was small and delicate of frame. No bigger than a pinch of gunpowder, Pa said. But she was filling out. The features she inspected so carefully and impersonally in the mirror were good. People were beginning to tease Lianne, telling her she had better watch out, with another beauty coming on in the family. There was nothing, though, that could change the four-year head-start Lianne had. Pa always gave her first choice, putting off his younger child with the assurance that her time was coming.

Lianne had been a baby when Pa had filed on free Idaho land, where he had prospered. Del had been born in the small log house that had since grown into seven comfortable rooms. From it could be seen the flashing Snake River, and the edge of the cove where Lea's house stood, nearly finished.

Del lay across the bed without turning back the finely stitched quilt. The soft featherbed puffed up around her slim shaking form, now racked with a new fear. She had been so sure it was Lianne and Otis Johns, since she had seen them hugging and kissing. But how could anyone with a mind want him, for all his slick good-looks, when they could have Lea!

Without a grain of encouragement her heart had set its roots around him. She treasured every tone of his voice as she heard it now in the other room. Soon he left and Aunt Electra, who had managed Ethan's home for years, bustled into the kitchen to start supper.

Ethan's voice, suddenly grave, came to her. "What's wrong, Daughter? Don't you like Lea?"

"Yes. Of course I like him," Lianne answered shortly. "But I don't want to marry him. Have you let him think I will, Pa?"

PA REPLIED sternly, "You're past twenty-one, an old maid already. I've give you time to pick a man, but you've flirted around till people are beginning to talk about you. Soon a good, steady man won't want you. So you're takin' Lea. I'll settle a thousand dollars on you at your weddin', same as I'll do for Del when she marries a man I can trust. Lea and me, we've talked it over. I don't want any foolishness out of you, Lianne."

Electra called from the kitchen, "Here comes a couple of men ridin' up to see you, Ethan."

Pa started to leave, paused to add, "And I fired that lazy Otis Johns. He sticks so close to the place I've begun to think he's a reason for not wantin' to be seen. I'm not harborin' any law-evaders. He's leavin' today."

Lianne came into the bedroom and

slammed the door behind her. Her face was angry red, her mouth hard and rebellious. "I hate him! I hate my own father!" she raved. "He treats me like I was some of his stock!"

Del sat up. "Sister, are you going to marry Lea?" she asked eagerly. "Are you, Lianne?"

"No! I'm not!" the older girl exclaimed. "I don't know what I am going to do, but it won't be that."

With freer breath Del persisted, "Is it because you're in love with Otis Johns already?"

Lianne whirled around. "What do you mean—" Her question changed to bold assertion. "Yes. I love Otis. And I've got to see him before Pa runs him off. Del, I'm going to the bunkhouse. Don't you dare tell Pa." She unhooked the screen of a side window, leaped out and was gone.

When Ethan came to supper he placed a package on the table. "Them men paid off a debt I wasn't expectin' to collect till the first of the year," he said. "I ain't goin' to put it in the safe at Promise City. There's been bums around robbin' places. After supper I'll hide this four-hundred dollars in the toolchest in the shed till I can get into town to a bank. You women watch it when I'm not here."

After he had eaten he rode down to Promise City, the crossroads settlement near by, to talk farming with his neighbors. Lianne had been in a silent mood, but Del had barely noticed it, so excited was she about her own plan. Her nerves drummed as she dried the dishes for Aunt Electra. Then she flew to the barn, saddled her pumpkin-shaped mare, Maggie, and started for Lea's place.

She had argued herself into it, because Lea was going to be terribly hurt if something wasn't done. If she could make him love her, instead of Lianne, they would all be happy. She was going to bring herself to his notice.

She powdered and put perfume behind her ears. A hundred strokes she gave her dark glossy tresses, pushed them into soft waves around her slender, finely-featured face, and caught the rest in a great soft knot at the back of her head. Lianne said a woman's hair could bind a man's will —if it was lustrous and beautiful.

Then she had put on her favorite red dress—and knew she was very pretty. Would Lea think so? He had to! She clasped her hands around the saddlehorn tight as a steel-trap and prayed.

When she arrived at his door her eyes were so large and dark, her face so white, that Lea was startled. "Del! What's wrong?"

His concern, his nearness, weakened her. It was awful the way he affected her breathing her very heartbeats.

It was hard to get the words going. "Lea. I—had to see you. . . . Do you like me a little?"

Lea's laugh rang out. "Like you! Why of course I like you, little Del," he exclaimed as he took her hands and led her into the room. "I like you a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck, like the old rhyme says."

It gave her an opening. "A—a hug around the neck?"

"Sure. Like this." He put an arm round her and pulled her head against his shoulder. It stirred Del as nothing had ever done. As she lifted her now rosy face her hair escaped from its pins, and tumbled down her back in a dark fragrant cloud. Lea's hand lifted unconsciously to touch it, to let his fingers slide caressingly through the silken web.

"Why, Del little Del—you're sweet," he whispered huskily, his gaze deep into hers. Del's heart ached with joy. Her lips lifted naturally for his. Her soul skyrocketed to heaven with his kiss.

Suddenly he released her and stood away, his face red. "I forgot myself. That wasn't right of me. I'm sorry—Del."

"Don't be sorry," she answered low and tender. "I'm not. I'm glad. We love one another. Isn't that something to be glad about?"

He shook his head. "You're too young to know about that yet. I've taken advantage of your innocence. Forgive me, Del."

"I won't forgive you—because there's nothing to forgive. I do know about love. I've been loving you all my life, Lea," she said with simple, sweet directness.

"Don't say that," Lea begged. "You'll be sorry some day when you meet the real one. And—I'm already in love, Del."

The fresh pink coloring seeped from her cheeks. "Is—is it Lianne? Oh, is it, Lea?"

"Yes, honey. I'm coming Sunday to ask her to marry me."

THE words that blasted all her hopes brought also a picture of Lianne—in Otis Johns' arms. Of the many other men her sister had loved—for a time. There was something unstable about Lianne. She was lacking in the qualities that would make a good wife.

"You'd be miserable with her, Lea. She—" It was next to impossible to say ugly things about her sister. She could only plead her own cause. "Give her up. It won't hurt her like it hurts me. She can't love you like I do. Can't you love me that way? Can't you, Lea?"

"Maybe, if you'd been born first I'd be right well satisfied, honey," he said, with a tenderness that tore at her. "The way things are, though, you'll have to be my little sister."

Hurt made her voice sharp. "I don't want to be your sister! Can't you see what a good wife I'd be? I can work better than Lianne, if you're thinking of size. I can weave faster. I got higher headmarks at school. And—I know about—love. . . ."

"You hush such talk as that!" Lea broke in roughly. "Twist up your hair and quit temptin' a man. It's gettin' late and I'm takin' you home. Behave yourself, now, and I won't tell your pa how you've acted."

Del grew tired of pleading. He didn't want to change. "Oh!" she cried in exasperation. "You've got no more sense than our old dominicker rooster! Lianne don't want you. She—"

Suddenly she stopped. It wasn't any use. She could tell by the angry red in his face. "You're set on marrying her then," she said in a last appeal.

"You're dead right I am!" he declared, unnecessarily loud. "Just as soon as she'll set the day."

Del ran from him, mounted Maggie and sped for home. Sobs pumped at her heart. Her pride hurt almost as sharp as the pain in her heart. She wished this was olden times, so she could have a witches brew for love made and feed it to Lea.

The night wind cooled her face. The taste of the great river was in it. The sound of it, too, where it rushed around the big bend. She cried softly, for Lea, for Lianne, for herself. She would get Pa to let her go to Salt Lake City to visit Aunt Belle, though she was cold and severe, and both girls were half afraid of her.

As she unsaddled Maggie Lea rode up. He was using the excuse of seeing she got home safely to see Lianne, she thought. Lianne was sitting on the front porch alone. But Del's keen nose smelled tobacco smoke. They had scared someone away. Otis Johns for sure. She knew it as well as if she saw him. Plopping herself down on a step, she resolved to stay there, even if Lea considered her a gooseberry, and wanted to be alone with Lianne.

He wasn't going to get a chance to propose tonight. If her sister said no, or if she said yes, either way would be bad. A little more time might help.

Lianne talked in nervous snatches, telling Lea how she was just there to guard the toolshed, where Pa had money hidden. Then Pa rode up, with a hearty greeting for Lea. He settled down for a talk about what news he had picked up in Promise City.

It was safe for Del to go inside then. As she got into a white muslin nightgown with embroidered yoke, she found her mind filled with disturbing thoughts of Lianne, more than of Lea. She had always loved her sister, careless, beautiful, somewhat selfish Lianne.

Now something stood between them. It wasn't jealousy of Lea. Because, while relieved that Lianne said she wouldn't marry him, Del resented it. If they had loved each other Del told herself that she would have made her heart quit wanting Lea, she would have quit meddling.

She turned the lamp-wick low, climbed into bed and pretended to be asleep when Lianne came in. But between her lids she watched the other undress. Suddenly she realized that Lianne had placed a pile of folded clothes on a chair, was getting into a dark traveling dress.

Del shot up in bed. "Lianne! You—you're running away!"

Lianne whipped around, came to the bedside and looked down at her with strange, bright eyes. "Why did you have

to wake up!" she fumed. "Well, maybe it's just as well. I'm going to see Aunt Belle. If I stay here Pa will make me marry Lea Stratton, and I won't do it."

Del's small feet slid from between the covers and reached for the floor. "You don't like Aunt Belle. You're not going there," she accused. "You're running away with Otis Johns. I'm going to call Pa!"

LIANNE grabbed her arm. "Wait, Del! Yes, I'm going away with Otis because I love him. He's waiting at the end of the lane with a rig. But you can't call Pa. I'm of age. He couldn't stop me. There would only be a quarrel. Oh, Sister, you've got to help me!" she begged. "Someday you'll find out about love. Then you'll know how wrong it would be for me to marry anyone but Otis. Honey, don't tell Pa till morning, so we'll have a chance to get away without trouble."

Del listened. Already she knew about love, that she would go against Pa, even the whole world, for Lea.

Del found herself helping to pack the suitcase.

For a last long moment she clung to her sister, sobbing and kissing her. Then she saw her slip out into the silent night, to go meet Otis Johns.

Del was extra tender with Pa at breakfast time. Misgivings assailed her. Romance of the night faded with the clear light of day. Dislike of Otis Johns returned. Slim-faced Otis, with eyes as black as wet tar and pale hands Pa said were more like a slick gambler's than a rancher's. But she hoped, with all her loyal little heart that it would be right, that Lianne was happy.

Pa had to know at last. "Run away to Belle's!" he repeated in a thin voice that made Del want to cry. "Why, the foolish girl. I wouldn't make her marry Lea, or anyone. I was tryin' to scare some sense into her flighty head. You write and tell her so, Del. Tell her to have her visit and then come home."

What was he going to do when he learned the truth! Dread and fear shook Del as she watched him go toward the tool-shed. She was unprepared for the sight of him coming back immediately, his face working furiously.

"The money's gone!" he said in an iron voice. "There's only one besides ourselves that knowed where it was. That's Lea Stratton. Lea stole my money!"

"Lea wouldn't take anybody's money and you know it!" Del fired back. "You said there were bums around. They took it."

"It was Lea said about the bums. It was a trick, pavin' the way then. He took my money!"

Across a great misery, a black gulf of doubt, Ethan Riser gazed at his younger daughter. In his eyes, as in her heart, was the same awful thought. Lianne had taken the four-hundred dollars. But never, never, would either of them voice such a thing. Ethan's wracked mind had been groping for someone—anyone—to place the blame on. Anyone but Lianne—his girl.

"But he knows it," Del thought. "He might even know about Otis Johns."

At that unfortunate moment, Lea came riding up the lane. For the first time Del didn't want to see him. For the first time bleak unfriendliness showed on Ethan's face. Even Lea looked peculiar. Everything was unnatural this morning.

"Mornin', Del. Mornin', Ethan," he said soberly as he dropped the reins and prepared to dismount.

"Don't light, Lea Stratton!" Ethan's tone, as sharp as a razor blade, cut the ties of long-time friendship. "There's no welcome for you here, since you've deviled my girl about marryin' you till she's run away. She told me she didn't want to marry you. But I kept on, thinkin' you was so fine, not knowin'—"

"Pa! Don't!" Del cried at the injustice.

"And furthermore," Pa went on ruthlessly. "Four-hundred dollars was took from my shed last night. You know about that, too."

Lea swung to the ground and walked toward the steps. There he looked up at the old man and spoke with slow deliberation.

"Why, yes, Ethan. I—borrowed that money. That's what I come over to tell you about. Something come up that I had to pay off right quick. I'll get it back to you as soon as I can ride in to town to the bank."

"We talked last evenin'. Why didn't you say about it then?" Pa demanded, somewhat calmer. "No. It don't hold water.

I doubt you've got a cent in the bank. You've bought lumber, and you was wantin' buy a stove and other fancy fixin's for your house."

DEL gave a little moan. Pa was trying to fool even himself. How could Lea take it so quietly! His patience held as he turned away leading his horse. "I'll send the money today, Ethan," he sent back, and made no mention of Lianne.

"Lea, wait!" she called desperately, and overtook him near the barn. "Pa didn't mean that. He's just hurt—and bewildered."

He took her trembling hands in his strong grasp. "I know that, little Del. It was a blow-off. He's upset right now."

"But how could you say you took the money?" she demanded. "You didn't. Lianne took it. You can't shoulder her blame."

Lea smiled. "Yes I can. My shoulders are broad," he said simply. "It won't ruin me to rake up four-hundred dollars. And it makes your pa feel better, right now when he needs it."

He's doing it because he loves her so much, little demons whispered to Del. Her courage failed her and she was sobbing softly, hopelessly, for the priceless love that had passed her by. Then—Lea's arms were around her, holding her tight and fast.

"You're cryin' for me, because you think my heart's broken about Lianne goin' away with Otis Johns," he murmured. "But it's not. I've seen them together and guessed how it was. I was hopin' to break it up because I distrusted him. Maybe I was wrong. He might be all right and make her happy. I hope so."

Del stammered, "But you wanted to marry her! You must have loved her. You said you did."

Lea answered frankly. "I thought so for a while. Lianne's pretty. She can dazzle a man's eyes. But last night—" He took the slim face in his palms, let her see the light in his eyes. "Last night I found out different, Del. I thought I was a fool at first, was mad at myself for kissin' you like I did. But afterwards I knew—that I was lovin' you, that you were wise and sweet. The sweetest thing in the world—"

Nothing, angel-brought from heaven, could be so devine as his words, as the way his lips came down to hers, to claim her kiss.

Presently they made plans. Lea would pay Pa the money and stick to his story that he had borrowed it, though he confessed to Del that he had gone on down the valley road last night, upon leaving their place, wooling over how to make Ethan understand there could be no proposing to Lianne Sunday. Coming back, he had seen Lianne slip from the shed and ride away with Otis Johns. Pa would have to know eventually. But time would soften the blow.

"He'll have to let me have you by fall, though," Lea stated firmly. "When the snow flies I want you there with me."

Day after day, Del showed Pa tender little attentions.

Pa gave in suddenly. Early one evening, a week after Lianne had left, he said to Del, "Honey, I've been a ostrich long enough. After supper you ride over and tell Lea I want to see him. Tell him to come and get his money. Lianne took it. I remember now of givin' it to her." He told the fib bravely, gallantly, and went on. "I've seen through a lot of things this last week. I must have been bad at fault, or she wouldn't have gone away."

Del's young arms nearly strangled him. "Pa! She'll come back. She's sure to come back."

Ethan patted the dark head. "I didn't aim to be mean to her, or to you, either. So—you tell Lea when he wants to see you he can come here, to your home. I ain't blind now, honey."

She thought the next hour would never pass, so anxious was she to carry the news to Lea. Now wedding plans could be hastened. The new carpet measured and sewn. So many happy tasks to do. She set the table and brought brown fried potatoes, and Pa's favorite gravy, and hot corn bread from the kitchen.

They were halfway through the meal when steps sounded on the porch. The screen door banged—and there stood Lianne. Her head was as high as ever, there was a mixture of question and defiance in her eye. Del jumped up to greet her, but something held her back. Maybe it was the cloudy look on Pa's old face.

"Well! I'll declare! You all seem mighty

glad to see me," Lianne said sharply. "This is a fine welcome."

"This is your home, Daughter," Ethan said. "Do you have to be told you're welcome here?"

Her relief showed. "No. Of course not, Pa," she answered in a changed voice. "Del, Aunt Electra, I'm glad to see you all. I may as well tell you I'm sorry I went away." She flung her hat on a chair, patted her hair, and was again one of them. "I've had a lot of trouble. Pa, you were right about Otis Johns."

Indignantly she sketched her experiences. Before the train ride was over she knew she had made a mistake. As they stepped from the coach, Otis had been arrested on a gambling charge of some kind. It had cost two-hundred dollars to keep him out of jail. She had slipped away, got a hotel room until she felt it was safe to leave, and here she was.

"I figured I was saving you six-hundred dollars when I took that money, Pa," she finished lightly. "You had promised me a thousand when I married Lea. Now—well, I guess you'll only have to give me the balance," she added magnanimously.

COLD fingers pinched off Del's breath. Lianne wanted everything back. Well, she couldn't have Lea! Unless— The familiar room went black. If Lianne set her cap for Lea, could he hold out against her—even if he wanted to?

"So it will end up the way you wanted, Pa. I'll marry Lea. I found out it's him I want, anyway," she heard Lianne saying. "That cheap, lying Otis Johns. I've forgotten him already."

Pa's quick motion stopped her flippant words. His callused hand slapped her hard, on both cheeks.

"You—you brazen thing!" he ripped out. "Have you no shame? Do you think Lea would want you now?"

Her gaping mouth spoiled Lianne's beauty. "But, Pa—I just made a mistake."

Ethan got hold of his emotions. "These self-centered women that don't bat an eye at ruinin' other folk's lives!" His gaze caught at stricken little Del. "Honey, you go outside. I've got some talk just for Lianne."

The habit of obedience moved Del. But it was her deliberate will that took her around to the open window. It might be mean, dishonorable, but she had to hear.

Electra brought Lianne a plate of food, which she ate like a hungry young animal, despite her shock. Pa watched her, his face showing love, regret, and a dogged determination.

"Daughter," he began. "I'm your pa. Always will be. Willin' to help you out of any kind of a scrape you get yourself into."

'I'm not in any scrape," Lianne interposed, her spirits reviving with food. "I just made a tiny mistake, that's all."

Ethan's hand on the table knotted. "You're past twenty-one. Time for you to begin to know what's fittin' and seemly in a girl. Time you got some common sense."

Lianne's blue eyes sparked. "I said I'd marry Lea, didn't I?"

Pa's fist banged the table. "My girl! You'll stay here for tonight. Early tomorrow I'm takin' you to Aunt Belle. She'll take the kinks out of you. I ain't fooled.

(Please continue on page 78)

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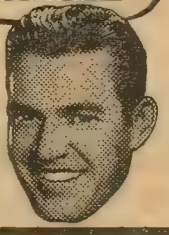

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FIRST BEAU FOR A HERMIT GIRL

By Bill Severn

PA STOPPED the wagon on Bentley's main street and Sukie Williams stepped from it into a new world. Inner excitement sparkled her green eyes and quickened her pulses. This was adventure!

Bentley was so crowded. Why, there must be half a hundred people on this one side of the street. Sukie had been in Bentley twice before in all her life. The last time, three years ago, she had been a child.

Pa came in every few months to bring bags of ore and get supplies for their cabin at the surface mine he was working in the Black Hills. But he never brought her. "It's a wicked place," he would say. "When we've got our stake, we'll head East, Sukie, so you kin be with the women folks of your family and meet right people."

He was a stern man, hardened by a lonely life and by the death of Sukie's mother when the child was ten. Knowing the ways of men in a raw mining town, he was afraid for Sukie. And he was bewildered, too, by the problem of raising a girl growing into womanhood. Pa's discipline was law and he enforced it firmly.

"Doc Lassiter's office is over yonder." He pointed across the street at the sign made like a big tooth: DENTIST. I PULL THEM PAINLESS. "I've got to go to the bank. Now, mind you, Sukie, don't talk to anybody at all, exceptin' Doc."

Sukie nodded, far too excited to answer with words. Crossing the street, she felt the men of the town staring at her. It disturbed her. But, in a way, it was pleasant, too. The looks made her breath catch tight. One man whistled and Sukie had to laugh at him; the whistle was so sudden.

She opened the street door and started up the single flight of wooden steps. The dentist had been her excuse for getting Pa to bring her to Bentley. She had ways of getting around him at times. Not by disobeying him; never that. She did have a tooth that hurt when cold water from the spring touched it or she took a bit of sweet pear. But maybe she had pretended a bit more ache than there was.

A young man sat in the office chair, reading the Bentley Star. Sukie hadn't expected the dentist to be this young. She stood before him. "I'm Sukie Williams."

He frowned slightly as he looked up from the paper. Then he took a hard look. His eyes went wide. They were gray and clear. They were nice eys. So was his mouth when he grinned. For a minute, he looked like he would whistle, too.

"I'm Sukie Williams," she said it again.

His head tilted a little and a touch of the frown came back. "Williams? You're—the hermit girl?"

Sukie had to laugh. "Hermits live in caves and things and—"

"Your Pa keeps you locked up all the time, doesn't he?" He stared. "Nobody who talked about it ever said you were—beautiful."

"He doesn't lock me up. Pa asks me not to talk to people, sometimes, when strangers come to the mine. I stay in the cabin then."

"You always do what you're told?"

Sukie, untamed Hermit Girl, found a brand-new, delicious thrill in kissing—even though Rancher Larry was going to marry another girl.

"It's too high," Sukie said. "Will you help me up?"

Sukie didn't see anything funny in that. "Yes. Why, sure—if Pa tells me." Goodness, he didn't seem any too anxious for her trade, the way he didn't get around to asking her which tooth hurt or anything. Pa would be angry if he came back from the bank and found the dentist hadn't even started.

Sukie bent close to him and pursed her lips, pointed a finger at her cheek. "It's here."

He blinked. His eyes lifted to hers, then went back to her lips. Suddenly, he moved his head forward and put his lips on hers.

It startled her. He seemed a bit startled, too, at first. Then the pressure of his lips became stronger, surer. His arms went around her and he pulled her down to his lap. He kept his arms tight and his lips where they were.

Not knowing what to tell her about men, Pa had kept her ignorant. But this, Sukie knew, was called kissing. And it was a mighty strange thing for a dentist to do.

SHE had read about kissing in the books she had. There was one book about a knight, almost as handsome in the colored picture as this man who was kissing her now. The knight in the book kissed a princess and woke her up out of a long sleep.

Pa said that was all make-believe stuff. But Sukie knew now it wasn't. She felt right now as if she had been asleep a long, long time—and his kiss certainly was waking her up.

He stopped after a minute and he took his lips away, but his fingers tightened on her arms and he kept looking right at her, shaking his head as if he were dizzy.

Sukie felt that way, too. She wondered whether she should tell him she liked being kissed. Looking at him, she decided he already knew. And she could see he had liked it, too.

It was only then that she thought of Pa. Pa would be furious!

Sukie got up in a hurry.

He stood up, too. He shook his head again. "There's a dance tonight at the courthouse—" the words were slow, confused, as though he were having trouble making words at all— "and, well, will you go with me?"

"Oh, no. I—don't know how to dance. Besides, Pa wouldn't let me."

"Let you? You're not a child. He can't stop you if you want to have a little fun. He—" The words trailed off. "Or maybe you don't want to go. Is that it?"

The office door squeaked open and an old man came in, a man older than Pa. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles and his eyes were all puffed around with tight wrinkles that squeezed up like the pleats in the ribbon at the hem of her store-bought skirt. The old man squinted. "Hello, Larry. Looking for Florence? She's up at the house."

So his name was Larry. But who was Florence?

"Yes, I was looking for her." Larry said it straight at Sukie: "Florence is going with me to the dance tonight."

The old man looked at Sukie, too. "What can I do for you, miss."

"You're—" Sukie swung around to Larry. "You're not the dentist?"

"So that's what you thought!" Larry laughed. "I wondered why you—" The laugh stopped. "I guess I had you wrong, Sukie, all wrong. I didn't mean to—" He backed toward the door. "So long, Doc." He turned abruptly, went down the stairs.

Doc's shaggy eyebrows lifted, then came down in a scowl. "What's eating him?" He sighed. "Which tooth, miss?"

Sukie started to purse her lips again, decided she'd better not do that. She certainly didn't want this old man to kiss her. She opened her mouth wide, poked her finger inside. "Over here."

Doc had almost finished working on the tooth by the time Pa came in. The two men shook hands. "How've you been?" Pa asked.

"Can't complain. And you, Williams?"

"Fine. How's your daughter?"

"Florence? She's getting married Saturday. Least, it's set for then. Twice now they've had spats and put it off. Nice enough young fellow, Larry Crowell. But I don't know. I've been trying to talk her out of it." He chuckled. "What chance has a father got when his daughter makes up her mind to something like that?"

The words were casual, but they slapped Sukie hard. Larry—marrying Florence, Saturday. Why, that was the day after tomorrow! And the way Larry had kissed

her, the way he had asked her to the dance tonight!

Pa's lips were tight and he was saying: "Sukie's got a long time yet before she gets marryin' ideas in her head. I'm takin' her East next year so she kin meet the right kind of men and—

Doc laughed. "You'll see, Williams. Just try to stop her when she finds the man—just try. You might as well tag a buzz-saw."

Pa didn't laugh. "My daughter has been brought up to obey me," he said.

Doc coughed. "You let that tooth set overnight." He was all serious again in the face of Pa's stern glance. "Come back in the morning, Sukie, so's I can smooth it."

* * *

Sukie lay atop the narrow bed in the hotel room that night, listening to the fiddle music that came in the open window from the courthouse, two squares away. She and Pa had rooms side by side on the second floor, up above a flat, wooden roof that girdled the side of the frame building.

She listened to Pa's uneven snoring, restless and loud through the thin wall. And she thought of what Larry had said: "You're not a child. He can't stop you if you want to have a little fun. Or maybe you don't want to go—"

She stood up and paced across the small room. She stopped and she heard Pa's snoring. And then, his snores were drowned out by the music of the dance. It was distant, but it seemed to be growing louder, louder. She quickly changed into a plain, long dress.

Sukie went to the window and looked out. It was an easy jump for a girl used to climbing trees.

She climbed across the flat roof and let herself down to the ground. She walked fast all the way to the courthouse, stopping only when she reached the door.

At the door, Sukie stood stock still, her eyes caught by the whirl of color and movement. Then she found Larry.

He was dancing with a slim red-haired girl who was wearing the most gorgeous dress Sukie ever had seen. That must be Florence. The dress was green and it looked like real velvet and there was a lot of white, frilly lace at the neck.

Florence's hair was done precisely, in waves and formal curls, not loose and naturally curly like Sukie's. And her face was as white and as untouched by the sun as Sukie's was tanned and freckled.

How can I compete with a girl like that? Sukie jumped her own thought as she realized what she had asked herself. Compete? It was the first time she had thought of Larry that way.

THE music stopped then. Larry saw her and a grin struck his lips wide. He crossed the floor as if a lodestone had snapped him across it. He came directly to Sukie and left Florence standing where she was, as though he had forgotton she had ever been there with him.

"You did come." He took both her hands in his. "You did come, Sukie."

Over his shoulder, Sukie saw Florence advancing upon them like a storm. But Florence was too wise to display her anger before Larry. The storm dissolved into a tight, careful smile as she reached Larry's side. "An old friend, Larry?" Florence asked.

"Why—" His face went red. "Lordy, Flo, I didn't mean to leave you like that. I saw her here and—" He swallowed. "This is Sukie Williams. We met—at your father's office and I thought, seeing she was a stranger in town and—"

"Sukie Williams? The—hermit girl?"

Larry's grin went even wider. "Not any more. She's here, isn't she? Her father's not keeping her locked away any more."

Florence's nose lifted an inch. "While you were inviting her, Larry, you should have told her the dance wasn't a masquerade. Those clothes—" She smiled that too sweet smile again. "I would have been glad to lend you a dress, my dear."

"I'll—get some punch." Flustered, Larry headed for the refreshment table.

Instantly, Florence's expression changed. Her voice was harsh. "I don't know how well you know Larry or how well you think you're going to get to know him, but you'd better keep one thing straight." Her eyes were black, intense. "I love Larry. I'm going to marry him. And you'd better keep away, little Miss Innocent Face, or you'll get hurt."

Sukie stepped back from the sudden blast of words. "Oh, I wasn't—"

"Don't try to lie to another woman. I

saw the way you looked at Larry. And the way he looked at you. Well, he's mine. He's going to stay mine. I love him. What have you to offer him? What—" She shut the words off like a water tap as Larry returned. "How nice," she purred as she took the cup of punch from Larry's hand.

Sukie took a sip. It didn't help the dryness of her throat at all. She had no right to be here. "I—I'd better go now," she faltered.

"You just got here."

"I know, but—"

He frowned. "I'll take you back to the hotel, then."

"Oh, no."

"You don't mind, do you, Flo? I'll be right back."

"Mind?" Florence's laugh was brittle. "Why should I mind? She's a stranger in town. We must be hospitable."

Walking back to the hotel, Larry held Sukie's arm.

"I shouldn't have come to the dance," she told him.

"You didn't want to?"

"I—don't belong. I—"

"I don't either, Sukie. I wouldn't stay in this town a minute longer than I had to. It chokes me to be here. I hate it."

"Why do you come here then?"

"That's a long story. Not being a man you wouldn't understand. It gets lonely out on my ranch. It's beautiful there, Sukie. But a man gets starved for companionship and—"

"But I do know about that. I sometimes ache from being lonely."

His face went tight. "When I think how your Pa kept you cooped up out there in that cabin, I could—"

"Please." She took her arm from him. "Don't talk about Pa like that."

He was silent a long minute. He started telling her about the ranch then. The way he told it, the cottonwoods and the stream close to the house and the sun splintering on the hills to spill into the valley, made music and poetry. Sukie could *see* it.

"I'm settling on that ranch to stay," he said, "as soon as I can make it a home."

Sukie looked straight ahead. They reached the hotel and Larry started to take her up in the main steps.

"Oh, no. The clerk in the lobby. He'd see me and tell Pa."

His face fell. "You sneaked out, Sukie?"

She had to tell him, then, how she crossed the roof. "And I'll have to go back the same way."

"You are afraid of him!"

Sukie looked at the ground. "I do what Pa says, if that's what you mean."

"And what if you fell in love with somebody, and your Pa forbade it, what then, Sukie?"

"I—" She touched her tongue to her lips. "I would have to wait until I am in love before I know what Pa would say." She moved to the side of the hotel.

He stood a moment at the corner of the building, looking after her. He took three quick strides to her.

She lifted her arms to reach for the wooden planks. "It's too high. Will you help me up?"

"Sukie?" He waited until she looked at him. His arms went around her. His kiss was full, complete. Her arms dropped and fell upon his shoulders.

"You can't just walk out of my life like this now, Sukie," Larry whispered, his lips so very close. "Don't you understand—I love you."

"No!" Sukie moved back from him. "Florence loves you. You're going to marry her."

Larry kept his arms tight. "That was before I met you. That was because I was lonely and wanted someone—"

"If I wasn't here, you'd go back to her." She turned her head away from his lips. "It couldn't be, Larry. I couldn't marry you, even if—"

Larry's arms dropped. His words were dead. "Because of your Pa. Is that it? Because your Pa won't let you?"

"Larry, you don't understand."

He swung around.

"Larry, aren't you going to—help me up?"

"No. I haven't time to play games with children." When his eyes lifted, Sukie saw the hurt deep in them. It was bare, naked in his eyes for an instant. "There's a woman waiting for me at the dance."

PA TOOK her to the dentist's in the morning, didn't let her out of his sight until they reached the steps of the building. "Goin' to a dance," he grumbled. "Sneakin' out in the middle of the

night. I don't know what's come over you, Sukie. I can't cope with you." He pushed the door. "Now you stay put here 'till I get back."

Wearily, she climbed the steps to Doc's office. A high feminine voice from inside stopped her as she put her hand on the knob.

Florence's voice. "Don't be silly, Daddy," Florence was saying. "I certainly am not going to move to that lonely old ranch of his and live there. Once Larry and I get married, I'll settle that. We'll move into town. He can buy a store or—"

Sukie's fingers gripped the frame of the door. She felt dizzy, sick with disgust at Florence's words, sick for Larry, being cheated out of living on the ranch he loved.

Florence's voice came to her again. "We're going to the church now to make the final arrangements for Saturday afternoon," she was saying. "Just as soon as Larry gets through over at the barber shop."

Sukie shrank away from the door.

She moved back down the steps to the street, hardly conscious that she was going down them, knowing only that she had to get away from there.

Florence didn't love Larry! Florence couldn't love him and do what she planned to do to him.

Sukie stood on the street in front of the building.

And then her head lifted. She clenched her fists and she marched right across that street.

She flung open the door of the barber shop and crossed a threshold no woman had ever crossed before.

Larry jumped up from the chair. "Sukie!"

She was simple and direct by nature and she spoke to him that way now. She told him what he heard Florence say. "She doesn't love you."

Larry's eyes lifted slowly and a soft, sweet smile started in them, spread to his lips. "Why are you telling me, Sukie?" he asked gently.

She kept looking straight at him. And she told him right out: "Because I do love you."

"Oh, Sukie." His arms were around her and he was kissing her. "I didn't think you wanted to see me again. I didn't think you'd have the courage to stand up to your Pa. I couldn't do it alone. It was no use unless you cared enough to fight beside me for our love."

Looking over Larry's shoulder, through the barber shop window, she saw Pa crossing the street to the dentist's.

And, looking at him, Sukie wasn't afraid of him at all.

It would take Pa time to get used to the idea, but he would. He'd have to get used to it. There wasn't anything he could do strong enough to stop them now that she and Larry were fighting for their love together.

Sukie reached up her hands and pulled Larry's head down to hers. She kissed him with all the new-found determination of her heart. "I think you'd better come out to our cabin and meet Pa the right way." She smiled, then asked: "Saturday afternoon?"

"Saturday afternoon will be fine," he said. "I'm not doing a thing."

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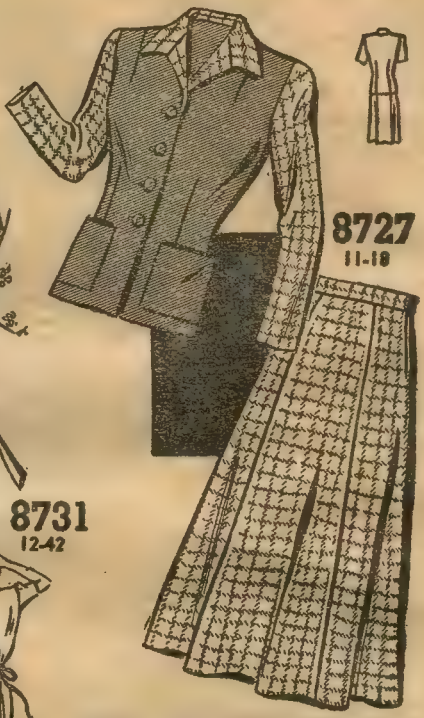

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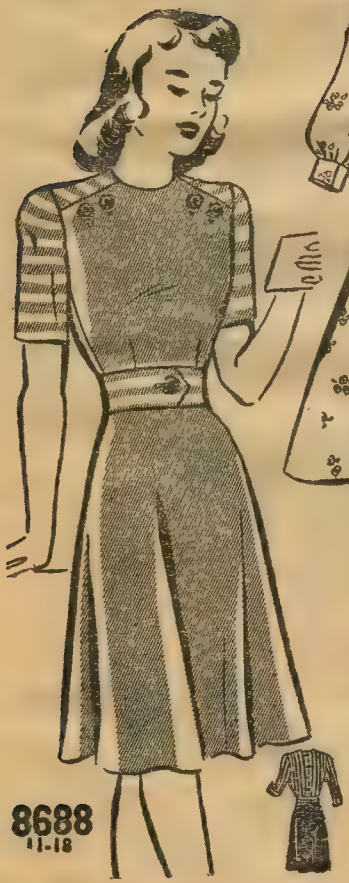

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NO KISSES

By Ennen Reaves Hall

"Do you two have to pick my house for your kissing?"

When Torchy, beautiful spitfire of the Lazy S, went to rout a lowly nester she didn't expect to find a handsome young fellow—who turned her blood to fire.

CHAPTER ONE

"I Could Tame You. . . ."

TORCHY, as everybody knew Tressa Shannon, dug her spurs just deep enough to send her pony racing towards the river. Her bright hair flew out behind her like a banner, and flags of the same vivid color waved in each cheek. Torchy was mad. Plenty mad.

It was all on account of the way Torchy's father and her Aunt Effie kept throwing Brice Rogers at her. And especially the way Brice was starting to take for granted that things were settled between them, the

FOR NESTERS

Exciting Novelette of Frontier Romance

nervy way he had just tried to kiss her.

Torchy was tired of the way her father and aunt kept trying to marry her off, anyway. Good and tired of it. Before Brice it had been a succession of cowpokes, a lot of them not fit for anything but guitar playing and tune crooning.

At first it had been almost funny, the way her father took to hiring only good looking riders and then found excuses to keep them trailing around after Torchy. But it had long since ceased to be funny, and when the persistent Brice Rogers arrived it had quickly become a downright nuisance.

Miss Effie Shannon had started it all. Because Torchy had reached her nineteenth birthday without having fallen in love her aunt had decided she was doomed for spinsterhood and had sown her seeds of alarm in the bosom of old Jed. Jed had reared his motherless daughter along the lines of least resistance and, until then, had been highly satisfied with the result. Couldn't Torchy ride and shoot with the best of them, bulldog a steer ten times her weight, and throw a red hot iron on a bawling calf without flicking an eyelash?

And that, his sister-housekeeper said, only proved her point. "You've gone against Providence and made a boy of her, Jed Shannon. Here she is, getting close to twenty, and never looking at a man except to see the kind of horse he forks. Tain't natural and you know it. She's getting hard and set in her ways and if some man don't take her in hand pretty soon she's doomed to be an old maid like me. Is that what you want, Jed Shannon?"

It wasn't, Jed had agreed. He wanted grandchildren for his old age. He began, very much, wanting Torchy to stop being a tophand and start being a beautiful woman. He could hire tophands. Beautiful women were scarce and rare in the Cherokee Strip of the Indian Territory.

But Torchy liked being a tophand and wasn't in the least interested in being a beautiful woman. She liked wearing levis and riding with the wind in her face. She liked being one of the men, enjoyed their comraderie without self consciousness. Miss Effie and Jed had spoiled all that. Now every time a man looked at her she could read ideas in his face. So she had taken to riding too much alone and it wasn't fun.

She rode alone that way, feeling resentment hot within her. Brice was getting intolerable. Aunt Effie and her mania for a wedding was getting intolerable. And Jed—well, everybody said Torchy was just a chip off the old block. She had the copper red hair, same hair-trigger temper, same stubborn will. So a clash there was inevitable.

Topping a rise in the sand hills, she pulled rein to gaze across the Cimmaron River in surprise. A thin spiral of smoke floated above the tall willows over there. She saw at once that it wasn't coming from ground level. It came from a bright new chimney atop a brand new log house. A shining little house, carefully made of peeled cedar logs, and half hidden by the trees that hugged the river bank. And at one side a man followed a horse drawn plow across a half broken field.

"Nesters!" Torchy spat out the loathed word worriedly, knowing trouble when she saw it. Time after time the ranchers had driven the boomer homesteaders out, but always there were some drifting back. This one, judging from the improvments he had made, had been unmolested longer than usual. But he wouldn't stay long after Jed Shannon or Jim Morrison of the Cross Bar M discovered him squatting there between the two spreads.

Killing a nester wasn't murder in their eyes. It was merely dealing out a just retribution, according to the cattlemen's code. The Cherokee Strip was for ranchers, not farmers. Didn't the law say so?

Remembering the last boomers the ranchmen had run out, Torchy shuddered. A frightened woman and three small children had driven off alone, leaving only blackened ashes and a new made grave to mark the spot they had hoped to call home. Why couldn't these nesters understand they weren't wanted in the Strip?

On a sudden impulse Torchy decided to ride over and warn the boomers. Surely they would leave quietly when she made it clear what they might expect.

AT THE river's edge she stopped, dismayed. The river was running high from a flash flood upstream. Usually it was broad and shallow just here, easily fordable. But spring rains had filled

it with muddy red water, racing past in a tumbling white-capped mass that indicated a swift current.

A stranger to fear, Torchy didn't hesitate long. She knew the bottom was firm and her pony could swim, so she urged the reluctant animal in. But she hadn't reckoned with that swift current. When the water rose belly deep on the horse and tugged at her booted feet with alarming strength she began to see the folly of bucking it. She was dressed for riding, not swimming. She tugged on the reins to turn the pony about.

But she was too late. The alarmed animal reared and the rushing water swept him off his feet. Torchy screamed as she felt that cold, muddy water rush over them, and pulled leather with all her might.

She was still clinging to the saddle when the horse regained his balance and started swimming. But he wasn't heading for the opposite bank, she saw. That swift current was carrying them down stream at an alarming rate. Torchy screamed again, remembering the plowman. "Help!"

Just as she thought that angry water would pull her arms from their sockets and suck her under, she heard an answering shout. They were midstream now and she could see the plowman on the bank, ready to throw the coiled rope. But only a cowpoke could do that, and an expert at that.

The rope settled neatly about the pony's neck and she gasped in surprised relief. Expertly he snaked them in and soon she stood, dripping wet and shivering, beside him.

Half drowned as she was, she saw he was young. Much younger than she had expected a nester to be. And straight and lithe as a young birch tree, with clear, honest gray eyes and stubborn thin lips that were unsmiling now. He looked actually displeased.

"You look old enough to have better sense than to try to swim a horse across a flooded river like that. Are you crazy, or what?"

Torchy saw red. Men she knew certainly didn't talk to her like that!

"And you look old enough to have better sense than to be plowing up good range land," she snapped. "But I reckon you're crazy, all right, or you wouldn't try booming into the Territory."

She shook some of the water out of her boots and continued on a milder note. "I'm Torchy Shannon of the Lazy S. I wanted to warn you to get the devil out while you're able. You're on Lazy S range and my dad won't stand for it. Now that I've told you I'm crossing back. Much obliged for the rope."

The man gave her a very ungentlemanly shove toward the cabin.

"Oh, no, you're not. Not till that flood crest runs down. Do you think I want to stand here snaking rope all day? You're going right in there and get dried out by the fire. If you get back over, you do it without my help."

Torchy was shaking with chill and the fire felt good. She held out her hands to its warmth and looked about the neat, though bare, room. There was no one else in sight. A single bunk in the corner, the stove and crude table and two chairs made of willow reeds, comprised the simple furnishings of the one room cabin.

"Where's your wife?" she asked in surprise.

"Haven't any," he answered shortly, throwing wood into the stove, "and don't want any. But if I did have one she wouldn't be forking a horse around the country like a man. I'd find something better for her to do."

"I can see some woman's missed some fine beatings," Torchy said. "Do you eat your meat raw, caveman?"

He grinned suddenly and the harsh lines in his face vanished. "I'm Larry Manning.

Blood plasma containers are made of YOUR waste paper! Our fighting lads will appreciate YOUR bundle of scrap paper. Any junk dealer or charitable organization will collect it.

Get your clothes off, if you don't want a beating. You're dripping all over my clean floor."

Torchy gasped, red surging into her face. "I most certainly won't get my clothes off! And to hell with your old floor!"

"That's another thing my wife wouldn't do—swear," he said, reprovingly. "And if you don't take off those wet clothes, I'll do it for you."

He made a step toward her and Torchy retreated, an act she hated doing. Hand darting toward her gun, she snapped, "Don't you dare touch me!"

His grin widened, but his eyes narrowed, unsmiling. "One of those kind, eh? Well, Miss Torchy Shannon, dare is a word I don't like. Anytime a persons slings it at me they've started something. And don't bother any about your gun. It's wet, you know."

With that he reached over, picked her up and dumped her like a sack of feed in one of the hard bottom chairs. Then he knelt and jerked off her boots, none too gentle, then her heavy socks. Then he stood, pulled her roughly to her feet and looked down into her big, blazing eyes.

"Shall I finish, for you?"

"Oh, you—you damn' nester!" Torchy spat the words at him like an infuriated animal. "I'll see you hang for this!"

He seemed unimpressed. "Me or you?" he asked again.

He wasn't bluffing, Torchy knew. Still more angry than frightened, she looked about in desperation. She was nearer the wood box than he and in a quick lunge she grabbed up a thick, heavy chunk of wood.

"I'll do it," she gritted through set teeth, "but you get out of here if you don't want your head caved in."

"Sure," he said, and now his smile suddenly reached his eyes and left a touch of blue in them, "I meant to do that all the time. I got plowing to do. You'll find some dry jeans of mine and shirt behind that curtain."

He stalked out, leaving Torchy feeling very foolish. And angrier by the minute for feeling foolish was something she didn't like.

Before long he knocked gently on the door, then opened it. He laughed aloud when he saw her standing there, a ludicrous figure in shirt and jeans several sizes too large for her, and old carpet slippers that swallowed up her small feet.

Even though angry, Torchy couldn't keep from thinking that his laugh had a clean, outdoors sound, like the wind whipping through the trees. But the sound of it now was just a lash laid on her wounded pride.

"What's so funny, caveman?"

"You are, Torchy Shannon." He came nearer and this time she stood her ground, scorning retreat. He laughed down into her face.

"I bet this is the first time anybody ever made you do anything, Torchy."

"You didn't make me do anything!" she blazed. "If I hadn't wanted to, you could never have made me!"

"Sure. Untamed and wild, ain't you? I'd like the job of taming you, Torchy Shannon, only I doubt if it'd be worth the trouble."

Torchy laughed now, her voice high and scornful. "Taming me? Better men than you have tried that, nester. But they didn't get far?"

"No?" The laugh, and the blue, left his eyes and now they held a queer gleam that gave her a suddenly uneasy feeling.

"I think I could tame you, Torchy. I even think I might like to. Ever been kissed?"

Giving her no chance for answer his arms went about her, drawing her quickly to him, and his lips crushed down on hers.

Torchy had never dreamed a kiss could be like that—exciting, like the heady fragrance of wild flowers.

She was bewildered, lost in the conflict of emotions that rocked her. She wanted to kill this man who held her lips with his as though he had a right. And she wanted him to keep on kissing her, never to stop.

He raised his head. His hands dropped from her shoulders.

CHAPTER TWO

Torchy's Decision

WILD with hurt pride, Torchy stampeded like a locoed steer. Once more she whirled to the wood box and this time she didn't stop with threatening. She snatched up a stick of wood and heaved

it straight at his head. He ducked and the missile hit the table. There was the splintering crash of glass and Torchy saw with horror the broken lamp on the floor, the widening circle of oil soaking into the clean boards.

Now real anger flooded the face of Larry Manning. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

"Now see what you've done! I ought to whale you—"

Torchy was plain scared, and dreadfully sorry about the lamp. But she certainly wasn't ready to admit it. Her eyes were still defiant as she glared back at him.

"Why don't you then? You started this taming stuff."

"All right, I will," he gritted, his lips tight. Then plopped into a chair, turned her over his knee in unceremonious fashion, and spanked her soundly.

When he put her on her feet and stood facing her again, his face was paper white. "I don't make a practice of beating women, but you had that coming."

With that he bolted through the door. When Torchy went to the window directly, she saw he was back at his plow, lashing his horse to a reckless speed.

Reluctantly, she found brush and soap and started cleaning up the mess on the floor. "That oil will keep spreading if I don't," she quickly defended her action to herself.

At sundown the man returned to the house, Torchy now wore her own clothes, nicely dried, and the fragrant smell of frying potatoes filled the cabin.

Larry Manning stood in the door, looked from the clean floor to the stove, then at Torchy again. She felt herself flush under that steady gaze, and tried to think of something cutting to say but for once was tongue-tied. He spoke first.

"You shouldn't dare men so. I was never one to take a dare."

That, she knew, was his apology. But whether it was for the kiss or the spanking —or both—she didn't know. The only thing she could think to say was, "Supper's ready."

An hour later, supper having been eaten in a heavy silence, they went down to the river's edge, Torchy leading her pony. The flash flood had run down fast and once more the water, though still high, rippled past in tranquil mood. It could be crossed safely now.

Larry Manning's voice had that hint of laughter again as he said, softly: "All tamed down. Looks as if somebody had spanked the mad all out of it."

It was the wrong thing to say. Torchy, who had started liking this nester in spite of not wanting to, saw red again.

"Listen, Mister Larry Manning. You can't tame rivers, or women, that easy. Just when you go to thinking you've done something smart they might explode in your face again. I'm giving you one more warning to move out of the Strip if you want to save yourself a lot of trouble. If you don't you'll find yourself plowed under with that seed you've been sowing."

Again the smile spread to his eyes. "By now you ought to know I don't like dares, Torchy. I'll be here when you want to come back."

There was nothing for Torchy to do but fork her horse and cross, feeling those steady eyes following her. Feeling a sense of defeat in her, a strange new sensation. It was the first time a man had ever bested Torchy Shannon. She didn't like it—or did she? She wasn't sure. . . .

It was nearly midnight when she turned in at the Lazy S corrals. Light streaming from the house told her old Jed and Miss Effie were waiting up for her. She'd have to think of something to tell them without mentioning Larry Manning. No use starting trouble in that direction if she could avoid it.

A figure loomed up in the darkness and Brice Rogers' voice said: "Torchy, where in the world have you been? Your aunt's been having fits."

"She enjoys them," Torchy laughed. "Life would be terribly dull for Aunt Ef if I didn't keep her frothed up."

"Me, too, Torchy." He put a possessive hand on her arm and she moved impatiently aside. "You keep me in a froth, too. I can't even get you still long enough to tell you how crazy I am about you."

TORCHY stood still now, a daring thought crossing her mind. How would she like it if Brice Rogers kissed her as Larry Manning had done? Would she feel that same wild excitement, the same

sweeping rush of ecstacy? And why not? She knew Brice Rogers better than she did Larry Manning. He was even better looking, with broader shoulders, crisp curly brown hair and soulful brown eyes. And Brice was in love with her.

"I am crazy about you, Torchy," he repeated and she turned to him swiftly, fearful of losing her courage.

"Then kiss me, Brice. Kiss me and maybe I'll know."

He kissed her, but nothing happened. It was just a kiss and it left Torchy cold. So cold she shivered, as though she had just walked over a grave.

A little frightened, she threw her arms tightly about his neck and put her lips against his again.

He crushed her to him then, and his lips took fire. But the kiss still didn't thrill her as Larry Manning's had done. She fought silently, frantically to free herself.

"What's this?" a big voice boomed close by. "What's going on here?" But there was pleasure, rather than anger, in Jed Shannon's voice.

Brice answered quickly, his own voice triumphant. "Congratulate us, Jed. Torchy's just said she loved me."

Torchy heard him in dismay. She hadn't said that, it wasn't true. But she had asked him to kiss her and that, according to the code of the cattle country, was admission enough. She bit her lips, trying to think of something to say.

Her father's arms went about her, his exultant voice exclaimed: "Torchy, gal, I'm the happiest man in the Nation. And Effie will be too. Let's go tell her."

"Wait, Dad . . . Brice. Let me explain—" But they weren't waiting, or listening. Before she knew it she was in the brightly lighted kitchen, hearing old Jed's booming voice like a dull, throbbing roar in her ears.

"Effie! What'd I tell you? These two's fixing to get hitched, right away."

Aunt Ef's squeals of excitement drowned out the denials Torchy was trying to make. Miss Effie's thin arms went about her neck and choked her past speaking.

"O, Tressa, baby, I'm so glad! I'd begun to think you'd never fall in love. When's it to be? We can have a big wedding and invite everybody. We'll have to send to Fort Supply and fetch a preacher. You can wear your ma's wedding dress I been saving for you—"

Torchy fled, thoroughly defeated. Another moment, she feared, and Aunt Ef would have her married! In her room she stared into the frightened eyes of the girl in the mirror. "What a mess!" she breathed, and started laughing. But in a moment she discovered she wasn't laughing at all. She was crying! And when had Torchy Shannon ever cried before?

When she awoke the next morning the sun was already above the horizon. Fighting off a strange, new feeling of depression she dressed hurriedly. A quick search for the bright red scarf she had worn yesterday proved futile. Had she lost it in the river? Or left it at the cabin? Well, no matter. She had other silk neckerchiefs, though none so brightly gay.

ISS EFFIE was humming softly as she scurried about the kitchen like a happy mouse. Hearing Torchy she called, gayly: "I've already got the dress out of the trunk, Tressa." Miss Effie was the only one who stuck to Torchy's real name. "I don't know if it'll fit or not but we'll soon see. You're going to make such a pretty bride. . . ."

"Aunt Ef," Torchy faltered, conscience stricken and hating to kill that bright look in her aunt's face, "there's not going to be any wedding. I—I've changed my mind."

"My stars!" Miss Effie turned horrified eyes toward her niece in the doorway. "Tressa, child, you can't do that! You can't just tell a man one day you'll marry him—the next you won't! It just ain't decent!"

"But, Aunt Ef, I didn't really tell Brice I'd marry him, I just let him kiss me to see how—what it'd be like. And I don't love him."

"Then you shouldn't of let him kiss you! Tressa Shannon, I'm plum ashamed of you! But of course you love Brice. You'll see you do, once you're married to him. Right now you just don't know anything about love."

Torchy was only half listening. She was wondering if Miss Effie had ever been kissed like Larry Manning had kissed her last night, and why there was so much difference in the way a kiss could stir you.

She broke in on her aunt's monologue.

"I just won't marry Brice, Aunt Ef. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" Miss Effie was plainly outraged. "You should be sorry, Miss. Acting like a hussy and getting Brice's hopes up that way! But it's what we might have expected from you!"

Torchy fled before the storm of Miss Effie's wrath. She saw Brice lingering at the corral, evidently waiting for her. She marched up to him bravely, avoiding his eager arms.

"Wait, Brice, I must tell you something. You misunderstood me last night. I don't love you. I can't marry you.

"But you kissed me, Torchy!" He sounded as shocked as Miss Effie. "You asked me to kiss you!"

"I know, Brice, and I'm sorry." Torchy had never felt so humble in all her life. "I —I was just trying to find out if I loved you, and I guess I don't."

Hot blood flooded his face and his eyes burned angrily. "Why, you damn' little red-headed hussy—"

Anger came to Torchy's rescue, though she was more than a little frightened at what she had started. "I'd never like kissing you! And I'm not going to marry you!"

Once more she turned and fled, leaving him standing there.

Miss Effie Shannon waylaid her enroute to her room. All the light had left the older woman's eyes and again her mouth was drawn into that tight little knot that made her look as if she had never said anything but prunes. Torchy knew that look and resigned herself.

"I've tried to raise you right, Tressa, ever since your ma died. In spite of your father's spoiling I've hoped you'd settle down some day. But I give up now. If you turn down Brice, I just naturally give up!"

There was tragedy in Miss Effie's voice and Torchy couldn't say a thing to comfort her. Alone in her room Torchy paced the floor, miserably unhappy. Maybe Miss Effie was right, she thought. What she had to do was forget that gray-eyed nester and think of Brice.

Torchy reached a sudden decision. She would see this Larry Manning one more time—probably he would look just like any other nester today. And she would take him a lamp, to square her obligation there. She would give him one more chance to leave. Then she would come back and—Well, maybe Aunt Effie knew best, after all. Maybe she could make up her mind to marry Brice.

CHAPTER THREE

His Own Rights

THE little new cabin still nestled under the trees. So she hadn't dreamed it! Torchy's heart was racing foolishly as she dismounted, careful of the lamp in her arms. Her knock brought no response. She opened the door and went in. Larry Manning must still be plowing and planting somewhere. Torchy's lips curled in scorn at the thought, but she unwrapped the lamp carefully and placed it on the table.

It was a pretty lamp, one from her own room. And it hadn't been easy, getting it out of the house without Aunt Effie seeing her. She's been in luck, finding no one at the corral when she'd saddled. Brice's saddled mount still waited there, but Brice had been nowhere in sight. That had been a relief, too.

She stepped back from the table, surveying the lamp. It looked nice. Then a bit of bright red protruding from a book on the table caught her eye. Curious, she opened the book and saw, carefully folded there, her lost neckerchief. Larry Manning had found it and kept it.

A sound at the door made her whirl about. She was looking straight into the violently angry eyes of Brice Rogers.

She reached behind her to shut the book, knowing it was too late. Knowing Brice had seen the scarf and the lamp. It was all there in his face.

"So this is why you changed your mind about me? Reckon Jed and the boys'll be right glad to learn about this cabin."

"Don't tell them, Brice. I—I only came to warn him to leave. I don't know him."

"No? Then what's your red scarf doing in that book? You was wearing it yesterday. And that lamp's from your room. You're not fooling me, Torchy."

"Shut up!" Torchy screamed. "Don't you dare say such things to me, Brice Rogers!"

"Because they're true, Torchy?" He

came nearer and stared down at her and his eyes were little angry fires leaping and raging in his dark face. "How do you reckon Jed will like the sound of it?"

Torchy was beaten and knew it. She scarcely knew why she stooped to plead with Brice, but she knew Larry Manning's life depended upon it. And that had suddenly become very important.

"Please, Brice, you don't understand. I was coming here to warn Lar—this nester to leave. Then I was coming back and tell you I'd marry you."

He laughed and the sound wasn't pleasant. "So I was right. You're having trouble making up your mind between us. Well, let me tell you, Torchy Shannon, I ain't competing with a grub worm. Is it to be me or him?"

"You, Brice, if you'll promise me you won't say anything to Dad or the boys about this place. I just can't stand seeing any more bloodshed. It's just a little place and he likely won't stay long and our riders seldom come over this way. I know you won't lie to me, Brice. Promise me, and we'll go ahead with our wedding plans."

He studied her face for a moment while she waited in agony of apprehension.

Then he said, softly, "It's a deal, Torchy. I'll take you on any terms. Kiss me to seal the bargain."

Torchy gave him her lips, hoping against hope that this kiss might be sweet and thrilling as she knew a kiss could be. But again she was disappointed. Brice's lips stirred no answering flame in her. But she didn't draw away. When Torchy Shannon made a bargain she kept it.

It was a voice from the doorway, sharp and clear, that made them spring apart.

"Get out of my house—to do your kissing," Larry said. "I like to keep my cabin clean."

ANGER was a swift and powerful thing surging up in Brice. Torchy felt it, and felt, rather than saw the quick drop of his hand toward his gun as he answered, "Get out of the country, nester, so we can keep it clean."

Her action was instantaneous. The flat of her hand struck Brice's wrist just as he dropped the hammer and the shot went into the floor not two feet from where Larry Manning stood, unarmed.

Brice swore and raised the gun again but now Torchy stood facing him, her own gun leveled.

"Put it away, Brice, before I shoot it out of your hand. You know I can."

He did know it, and reluctantly holstered the gun.

Larry Manning appeared not to notice this by-play. He started for Brice. "You splintered my new floor I hauled all the way from Kansas. I'm going to take you apart for that."

"You're not going to touch him," Torchy said. "If you do, I'll sink lead in you. Get going, Brice, and don't forget our bargain."

Brice edged past Manning, plainly more afraid of Torchy than the nester. "I'll wait across the river," he said.

"You needn't," she snapped. "You're supposed to be riding the brush on the south range. Remember?"

There was silence in the cabin until the sound of Brice's pony's hoofs had died away.

Then Larry Manning said, "So that's your idea of a man. Or do you just kiss anybody?"

Furious at the insult, Torchy raised her hand to slap him, remembering just in time that it still held the gun. "I'll kill you if you say anything like that to me again! I'm going to marry Brice and I've got a right to kiss him."

"Not in my house," he said coldly. "Not in the very spot you kissed me yesterday."

"I didn't—" Torchy couldn't finish the lie. "Oh, I hate you, Larry Manning! You just come here to cause trouble when you know you've no right—"

"Who says I haven't?" he broke in. "The Indians own this land and they're not kicking. I've got the same rights—"

"Oh, you fool! We're not talking about rights. We're talking about you being killed if you don't get out! You ought to know the cattlemen won't let you stay. For if they did the country would soon be full of nesters, and the grass all plowed under."

"That's right," he said quietly. "That's just what's going to happen, Torchy Shannon, and the day ain't far off. The grass will all be plowed under and these prairies will be a sea of grain—a green sea, slowly turning to gold. And I'm staying to see that happen."

"You'll be dead," Torchy almost sobbed

in her exasperation at this stubborn man. "You'll be planted right under that waving grain. So what good will it do you?"

A smile touched his lips and eyes briefly. "A man doesn't fear dying for something he really believes in. Can you understand that, Torchy? Or have you ever believed in anything or anybody that much?"

Had she? Torchy thought of her bargain with Brice Rogers to save this stubborn man's life and now she understood why she had made it. Her voice shook a little as she answered.

"Sometimes dying isn't the answer. Sometimes it's living, which is harder. I wonder if you can understand that, Larry Manning?"

He turned the subject so abruptly she jumped. "What is your name? Your real name, I mean?"

"Tressa. But I've always been called Torchy except by Aunt Ef and my mother, before she died."

"They should have made it Flame," he said. "You are like flame—bright and beautiful. But you'd burn, and burn deep. You'd leave scars a man couldn't forget, Flame."

"My Aunt Effie never married. She thinks it's better to have scars—than nothing."

She was hardly conscious of his arms, drawing her close. She only knew that suddenly his heart pounded against hers and that she was looking into eyes that had turned a deep, deep blue, but not with laughter. With something else that sent all the blood tingling through her in a wild tumult.

"Your Aunt Effie may be right," he said softly, and took her lips.

Torchy knew she should protest against that kiss, should end it. But she was like a drugged person, as helpless and weak as a reed shaken by a storm. She was out of this world, walking on stars, with nothing above or below her. Nothing but Larry Manning's arms, his lips.

It was a long way back to earth but the fall was quick and hard for Torchy. Larry dropped his arms so suddenly she almost fell, walked over and put a stick of wood into the stove very carefully. His voice sounded quite casual.

"That ought to make a scar deep enough to feel a long time. So I think you'd better go, Flame."

Torchy snatched up her hat from the floor and rushed to the door. She had to get away from there quick, before her heart betrayed her again. How could a man kiss like that and then speak of it so casually?

At the door she turned, against her will, and caught him off guard. And there was nothing casual in his eyes, or the tight line of his lips, or his clenched hands. There was only hurt and a great, aching loneliness.

He said, "I think you forgot something, Flame. And since you won't be coming back, you'd better take it." He walked to the table, picked up the pretty lamp and held it out to her.

"But—I wanted you to have it. I broke yours."

HE SHOOK his head, unsmiling. "I won't need it. I'll have a memory far brighter than that little flame. But you'll need a light every moment of your life when you marry your Brice. You'll be afraid of the dark."

The truth of it hit her like a blow. With a strangled cry she turned and ran, leaving him standing there holding the lamp.

Halfway home she checked the furious pace of her horse as she remembered the red scarf. Larry hadn't offered her that. Had he forgotten it, or did he want to keep it there in his book as a reminder? Bright red, it was—red as flame.

And Torchy was crying, great scalding tears born of the searing pain in her heart. She was in love at last, she knew. But not with the man she had to marry. She had to marry Brice Rogers because she loved Larry Manning. There was no other way to save Larry. . . .

Torchy was in the kitchen, helping Miss Effie with supper when Brice came in. He stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders almost filling it, and his brown eyes were alight with a triumphant glitter.

"Well, Miss Effie, I guess you can make that cake tomorrow, and fix up that wedding dress. I been talking to Jed. He's willing I should ride for the preacher. We ought to be back by the day after."

Torchy's heart dropped to her toes as Miss Effie squealed with delight. Jed, coming in, wasn't much better. Supper took on the nature of a celebration, with every-

one excited and happy except Torchy. Apparently they didn't notice, perhaps because they couldn't expect too much capitulation from her.

After supper she had to submit to trying on the dress.

Miss Effie was enraptured with the effect. "Oh, Tressa, you're simply beautiful. And I'm so happy I could cry."

Torchy was afraid she would and said, a little crossly: "Anybody'd think it was you getting married, Aunt Ef."

"In a way, it is," Miss Effie answered, quite seriously. "Seems some of us are just born to live in other people, Tressa. All my real living's tied up in you. That's why I want you to have things I never had."

Suddenly understanding, Torchy leaned over and kissed her.

Then she stood patiently still for the rest of the tedious fitting. This was really Aunt Ef's wedding and she must make it as perfect as possible for her. It was all Aunt Ef would ever have.

Finally Miss Effie finished and pushed Torchy from the room. "Brice is waiting to say good night," she simpered. "Do go out and see the poor boy, Tressa."

He was waiting on the veranda. "I'm leaving at daylight, Torchy. It's a long ride and will take all day and more to go there and back."

"What was your hurry, Brice?" All Torchy's held-back anger flared up. "I gave you my word, and you hadn't any right to be afraid I wouldn't keep it."

He dropped the hat with which she had been fumbling nervously, and took her roughly into his arms. "A man in love makes his own rights, Torchy."

Fear struck sharp and clear at Torchy as she pushed Brice away so she could see his face. "You wouldn't break your word, Brice?"

"I'll keep my word, if you keep yours. I won't tell Jed or the boys about the nester. But we're getting married soon's I get back."

She had to be satisfied with that, though some vague uneasiness still troubled her. She even suffered his kiss, trying hard to capture some of the sweetness the hour should hold. Brice was tender, so some of the weight around Torchy's heart lifted. Perhaps Aunt Effie was right, she thought. Perhaps she could learn to love Brice when they were married. Perhaps she could forget Larry Manning. She must!

CHAPTER FOUR

Cupid's Strategy

BREAKFAST was hardly over before the smell of baking cake filled the house with fragrance. Above the clatter in the kitchen could be heard the sound of Miss Effie's happy singing.

Fearful of breaking into screaming protests, Torchy escaped, got her horse and rode blindly away.

Toward noon she came across four of Jim Morrison's Cross Bar men, resting in the shade of trees. They hailed her.

"Howdy, Torchy. You aiming to join our war party?"

Torchy's heart lurched, then seemed to stand still. "What party?"

"Why, we got word there's a nester squatting over in the bend of the river, other side the sand hills. Being's he's on Lazy S range we've sent over to ask Jed and your boys to let us in on the fun."

Torchy clenched her hands on the saddle horn, fighting for self control. "Must have been Brice Rogers told you that. He was just stringing you boys."

"Reckon not, Torchy. Matter of fact, he didn't much want to let us in on it. Jim had to sort of drag it out of him, and Brice made him swear not to mention his name. But since you know—"

"I know, all right," Torchy said grimly. "You boys be sure and wait on us."

Racing toward the Lazy S she tried to figure her chances of persuading her father to stop this slaughter.

About a mile from the house she met four Lazy S riders and the one from the Cross Bar. They whooped as she reined in directly across their path. "Come help us chase off a nester, Torchy!"

"You mustn't, boys!" she called frantically. "There's been a mistake—"

This brought jeers. "Sure has, but he made it. We're out to correct that mistake right now."

They spurred their horses but she raced after them. "But listen, boys! He isn't a nester! Dad said he could work that land —could stay there."

She saw the men look at each other and knew her feeble ruse had failed even before one of them said, "That's not what Jed told us. He said go get him."

They raced away and Torchy spurred her own horse into a fresh burst of speed.

She found Jed resting on the veranda. "Hurry, Dad! Stop the men! There'll be a killing if you don't!"

"Are you crazy, Torchy? They're just going to run off a damn nester. If there's any killing it'll be his fault."

"What's the difference whose fault it is, Dad? I just don't want any more murders committed. Please stop them!"

"Murder?" Jed roared, getting to his feet. "Who said anything about murder? Since when is killing a nester murder?"

"Even nesters walk on two legs, Jed," Miss Effie said from the doorway. "Tressa's right and you know it."

"I don't know it." Jed's stubborn mouth was tight as a steel trap. "I told the boys to run him off and that's what they're going to do."

Despairing of moving him Torchy sobbed, "But Dad, I love him!"

Her words sounded like rocks clattering into a deep canyon well, so still was the silence into which they fell. When Jed broke that silence his voice was incredulous.

"Love him? Did you say you love him, Torchy? Why, you're fixing to marry Brice tomorrow."

"But I don't love Brice, Dad! I only promised to marry him so he wouldn't make trouble for Larry and he lied to me! I love Larry. And if I can't marry him, I'll never marry anybody."

Miss Effie said, sounding awed and wonder stricken: "She ain't lying, Jed. She's really fallen in love at last! And with a nester at that."

LD JED came to life with a bang. "What's the difference who he is?" he roared, just as though all this was Miss Effie's fault. "If Torchy wants him I guess she can have him!"

He was halfway to the corral before Torchy could catch up with him. She helped him throw gear on his horse, then they were thundering off toward the river.

The sound of shots drifted to them before they reached the ford and Torchy's heart pounded in an agony of fear. But the shots continued at intervals, which was reassuring. Larry must be giving a good accounting of himself, fighting eight men. A little thrill of pride tingled through Torchy.

When they reached the river they saw Larry was entrenched in his cabin, his besiegers firing from the protection of nearby trees. Even as they splashed through the water she saw a man working his way cautiously to the rear of the house, moving from tree to tree. The sun glinted on the gun in his hand, then touched his face and Torchy cried out in surprise. It was Brice Rogers! Brice, who was supposed to be on his way to Supply to get the preacher.

Anger swept through her at this new evidence of Brice's treachery. She spurred her horse straight toward him, Jed close behind her.

A Lazy S boy yelled, "Look out, Jed! That's a shooting fool in there!"

A shot rang from the house and Jed's hat sailed into the air. Torchy screamed and jumped from her horse. She landed running, straight for the cabin door, hearing Jed pounding after her, yelling, "Hold your fire, boys!"

Flinging open the cabin door, Torchy stared into the barrel of Larry's leveled gun. "Put that down, Larry. We're here to stop this."

He lowered the gun, anger draining from his face but his eyes still suspicious. "What's the deal?" he asked quietly.

Jed pushed into the room. "Torchy's doing the dealing, Manning, and she's throwing all the cards to you. The Lazy S is as much hers as mine and the man she marries won't have to scratch in the dirt for a living."

Larry looked at Torchy, a long questioning look. Color flamed in her face but her eyes didn't fall under his searching gaze.

He asked, softly, "Is that the way you want it, Flame?"

She answered, "That's the way I want it, Larry."

ARE YOU BACKING THE 6TH WAR BOND DRIVE?

By this time the door was crowded with curious cowboys. Larry turned his gaze on them and his eyes went flat and hard as he saw Brice Rogers.

"I don't," Larry said.

Brice pushed in, blustering as he saw the stricken, hurt look in Torchy's eyes. "I can explain everything, Torchy—"

"Don't try," Larry said. "There's things to be said between you and me, Rogers."

Turning to Jed Shannon, Larry offered him his gun. "Mr. Shannon, I'm a nester and I'm aiming to stay one. So nothing's been settled. What I'm proposing is this —me and Rogers will fight this out bare-handed. If he can lick me, I'll leave. If he can't, he leaves. And I'm free to stay here and farm my little place in peace. That's all I want. . . . You willing, Rogers?"

"Hell, yes." A pleased, confident smile played about Brice's lips.

"No!" Torchy stopped Larry's progress to the door. Little angry flags waved in each cheek, but her bright head was held high. "There's no need for that, Larry. You're free now. I promise you no one will bother you here." She repeated for emphasis, knowing he would understand. "No one."

He gently moved her aside. "I guess there's some things a man just likes to fight for, Torchy. Being free's one of them."

There was nothing left for her to say. Nothing to do but follow the men into the yard, where they quickly formed an excited ring about Larry and Brice. Jed Shannon's eyes were puzzled, but he had said nothing at all, just a nod of agreement to Larry's terms.

Until they faced each other there, Torchy had not realized how much bigger and broader shouldered Brice was.

But Larry, she soon saw, was quicker. He moved lightly about the heavier Brice, keeping just out of reach. His long arms flashed in and out with lightning speed, landing hard on Brice's face.

Finally, like an enraged bull, Brice rushed Larry. Breaking blindly through his guard, Brice flayed him with fists like pile drivers. Larry folded as a vicious jab landed in his midriff. Before he could straighten up Brice kneed him, sent him sprawling on the ground.

A horrified gasp broke from Torchy's lips as Brice raised his booted foot to kick the pain-blinded Larry in the face. It was Jed who stopped that kick.

In a breathless silence Jarry stumbled to his feet, shaking his head to clear it. Brice rushed him again. But Larry stood, waiting. Torchy tried to shut her eyes so she couldn't see the rest. At that, she almost missed Larry's quick move. Waiting until Brice was very close, Larry made a quick upward swing. Brice's big body seemed to rise right up into the air, then crashed to the ground and lay still. The fight was over.

Somebody asked, hoarsely, "Is he dead?"

"Just knocked out," Jed Shannon answered, "and a good, clean job it was too. When he's able, boys, put him on his horse and tell him to keep riding."

His glance at Larry was friendly, as were those of the others. Torchy knew Larry was no longer a hated nester, but one of them. He had won his freedom. Jed put her thoughts into words.

"You'll not be bothered again, Manning. Though it beats me how a man can turn down a half interest in a spread like mine, and a girl like Torchy."

"I haven't turned down Torchy, Mr. Shannon. I'm taking her, if she'll have me. . . . Will you, Flame?"

His eyes were pleading with her to understand. They were saying other things too, things that sent the wild blood singing through Torchy's veins. But there was something. . . .

"You said you wanted to be free, Larry. Remember?"

"That's right, Flame. Free to ask the girl I love to marry me, in my own way. Did you think I wanted it said that I'd married you as a sort of compromise for peace?"

"Peace?" Jed snorted. His voice filled with laughter. "If you think you're going to have Torchy and peace both, man, you're sure mistaken. I've known no peace since I first saw her."

Larry smiled and took Torchy in his arms as the others rode away. "I know something better than peace, Flame," he murmured. "Peace can be mighty lonesome like."

Torchy raised her lips to meet his. "I'll see that you never get lonely again, Larry."

THE END

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

ARIZONA HASH

should not be overlooked by ambitious camp cooks. And this has the advantage of being easily cooked over any fire. Slice two large onions and brown them in fat or cooking oil. Add a pound of ground or chopped veal. Rump or shoulder is best. Brown the meat lightly. Add two and one-half cups of cooked or canned tomatoes, half a cup of uncooked rice, a teaspoon of chili powder, teaspoon of salt and a quarter teaspoon of pepper. Cook slowly until the rice is tender, which should be within thirty minutes. This hash has the advantage of being a dish which may be prepared ahead of time and warmed later. Handy if you aren't sure just when folks are going to turn up at camp.

BREAST OF VEAL

is another handy recipe. For this get about a six-pound breast and have it boned at the market for stuffing. Fill the cavity with this stuffing: Brown a quarter of a cup of chopped onion in a quarter-cup of fat or margerine. Mix with six cups of soft bread crumbs, a teaspoon of salt and a teaspoon and a half of poultry seasoning. (For this you can substitute a teaspoon of powdered sage.) Add a quarter of a cup of water and mix thoroughly. Fasten the edges and brown the meat on all sides in fat or vegetable shortening. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, add half a cup of water and cover. Cook slowly from two to three hours. This is a good Dutch Oven dish and lends itself excellently to an open fire which is kept down to a bed of coals.

Boiled rice or baked potatoes would be a tasty addition to the breast of veal dinner. With some sliced or stewed tomatoes. Or hot biscuits will replace either.

Sixgun Sweetheart

By Agnes Best Nafziger

Sassy, salty Mikkie thought it would be gay fun to pose as a prim school teacher. But that was before she met Cowboy Jim Carmody—and the coldly beautiful, exotic Glenda.

MIKKIE drew her sorrel pony to a stop in the middle of Oxtree's main street and stared about her with wide blue eyes—the same blue as the ribbon tying her blonde curls back from the pert, freckled little face with its tip-tilted nose and firm chin.

So this was Oxtree, the mining town to which she was supposed to bring book learning. Mikkie's brown cheek dimpled mischievously.

"What book learning and school teaching will do in that coyote's hideout, I'm danged if I know," the man who was giving his horse a drink in the creek down canyon had told her when she asked him how far it was to Oxtree. He was a youngish man with an unexpectedly soft voice, pale, deep-set tawny eyes, and when the wind blew back his coat she got a glimpse of an elegantly silver-beaded black vest.

"Is that what it is—a coyote's hideout?" Mikkie had asked, with interest. This might not prove to be such a dull adventure after all.

"Sure. Any place where some folks find a million in gold and the next fellow only gits iron pyrites is bound to fill up with coyotes of one kind and another. Good luck teaching 'em, miss."

Mikkie sighed as she rode on. How in tunket she'd ever let herself in for this job was more than she could figure out, now that she was calm and sane, which she had not been when her sister Ruth became so fearfully ill. Poor Ruth had sobbed and moaned, making her fever mount dangerously, "What will become of us! We'll starve without that job; I was so happy to get it! Mikkie, you got to go to Oxtree in my place. You can teach—"

Mikkie's blue eyes had widened in horror. "Me—teach school? There now, Ruthie dear, you're delirious. Drink some of this nice cool water." If Mikkie hadn't been so worried about Ruth, she would have laughed outright. She'd never even liked school and had gone only because pop made her—though even he preferred having her ride with him on the range, taking the place of the son he'd never had. Ruth, delicate and brainy, had been different; pop and Mikkie had been so proud of her.

Then pop was gone, and with the two sisters alone and quite penniless, Ruth had been very glad to get the teaching job in Oxtree. Her sudden illness, demanding hospitalization, made Mikkie desperate enough to double for her sister.

This Oxtree place looked interesting. The main street, twisting and climbing along the canyon floor, was lined with unpainted buildings that had ugly false fronts and just about every second one had batwing doors from which rough looking men teetered out while other strode in.

Over the other doorways were various signs: Assay Shop, Oxtree Bank, Rocks Assayed Here, Oxtree Hotel, Fair & Square Assay Company, Brock Merc. & Supplies.

As Mikkie studied the little town, a group of people in front of the Brock store looked at her with equal interest—at the slim little figure boyishly erect in the saddle, blue shirt open at the throat. A rangy cowboy, tan sombrero pushed to the back of his tow head, stepped into the street.

"Looking for somebody, miss?"

She turned to him and liked what she saw. A strong-limbed, brown-skinned man with clean, steady eyes and an arrogant nose and chin. He wouldn't take any sass from anybody, she could see instantly. An odd thing happened to Mikkie's heart as their eyes met; its staunch beating seemed

"You little devil," he whispered.

to falter, then race ahead, and her breath chunked in her throat.

"I'm the new school-teacher, Mikkie Harris," she said.

The cowboy's eyes twinkled at her garb—the boots and jeans and even a gun belt around her slim hips, with a black handled revolver in the holster. "That's the dangedest school-teaching outfit! And I thought the name of our new teacher was Ruth Harris."

Mikkie suppressed a little gasp. She was making mistakes early. "Sure—Mikkie Ruth, usually Mikkie," she said glibly.

"I see." His look was grave, and again Mikkie's heart went pounding out of bounds. "It's at my sister's you're to live. I'm Jim Carmody. I'll get my horse and show you the way."

She watched him go down the narrow side street by the store, his wide-brimmed hat still rakishly to the back of his head, his plaid-shirted shoulders looming broad above the narrowness of his hips. Little warm shivers, like long reaching fingers, crept all through Mikkie, making her body tingle electrically. Angrily she turned her eyes away only to stare in stunned amazement: from the side door of the store a man had suddenly appeared—a man aiming a gun straight for the cowboy's back!

Mikkie's father would have been proud of her quick draw, lightning-like aim. Her bullet zoomed.

The shot sounded like a crack of dynamite in the quiet street. The group in front turned in her direction as the gunman, obviously unhit, fled behind the building and disappeared. Only then did Mikkie realize that the sun had made silver glints on his vest.

"She tried to shoot you in the back, Jim!" cried a girl, riding pell-mell toward Mikkie. She pulled her black horse to a stop and glared in tight-lipped fury at Mikkie, while the others on the street came running. Jim Carmody, striding back, stared at the smoking gun in her hands.

"She's a pal of Flint's maybe!" yelled a long-haired miner excitedly. "What out for Flint Silver! He's gittin' you outta the way, Jim, like he did your brother, and he's gittin' purty low when he sends girls to do his dirty work!"

"The whole town's had nothing but trouble lately!" panted a fat man. "My bank robbed, stage driver held up and killed, Brock's store looted! If the sheriff don't catch that jasper danged quick, I say get a new sheriff."

The girl on the black horse held her nervous mount still. "This girl tried to shoot you, Jim," she repeated. "I saw her aim at you and fire. Call the sheriff, somebody! What are you all staring at?" she demanded imperiously. She had flashing black eyes and berry-red lips that curled haughtily. Her face was pale with rage, a startling paleness against her black hair.

MIKKIE felt a cold rage surge through her. "I wasn't shooting at him. I aimed at a coyote," she stated. The eyes of the two girls met; instant hostility flared between them.

The crowd muttered angrily, but Jim Carmody's big voice calmed them. "Just a minute, everybody! This is Mikkie Ruth Harris, the new school teacher. She comes from cow country where shooting is almost as common as it is here. After this she'll stick to books instead of guns. Glenda, meet your new boarder, Miss Harris."

Mikkie's jaw dropped. She was to live at this girl's house! Glenda herself looked utterly astounded.

"You must be mistaken, Jim," she said faintly. "This couldn't be the school teacher—"

"Oh yes it could," interrupted Mikkie icily. If it wasn't for her sick sister, she'd end this thing right now. Looking about her she saw only hostile faces—except Jim Carmody's. His mouth was quirking as if he was holding back a grin. "But maybe I better find another place to board and room."

Glenda started, looking uncertain. Then abruptly she smiled—a brilliant smile that included everybody. "Of course not, Miss Harris! You must forgive me if I seemed upset, but I just don't like shooting." Her voice lowered tremulously, and her large eyes shone with tears. "It is so short a time since my own—tragedy. You must forgive me. Jim darling, you'll see Miss Harris home? I must do my shopping before it's too late." Her smile to him was intimate and appealing, then she rode off, her black horse prancing proudly.

Jim led Mikkie's horse through the crowd which parted slowly for them, still staring at her suspiciously. Jim's saddled

bay stood back of the store. He mounted and moved close to her.

"Just between you and me, Lady Sixgun, why did you shoot?" he asked, with interest.

Mikkie's blue eyes met his steadily. "I saw a fellow aiming at your back. Maybe he didn't intend to shoot you, but I didn't wait to see. Looks to me like somebody is out to get you."

"I see." For a moment his cloud-gray gaze met hers as steadily, then he grinned. It was a boyish, infectious grin, starting with a faint quirk of his lips, broadening slowly until his whole face seemed bright and engaging. "I'm going to believe he intended to shoot, because that means you saved my life. And when a girl saves a man's life right off, its okay for him to fall in love with her right off, don't you think?"

Mikkie gasped, but his eyes held her. It seemed to her as if his arms were around her, pressing her so she could not move. Little tongues of flame bathed her, and she felt deliciously weak and tremulous, while her heard pounded so it hurt.

"Don't look so scared," he said gently. "I'm not going to kiss you—yet."

"You—aren't?" asked Mikkie, trying to be flippant and sounding only frightened.

Fire shot into his eyes. He leaned over and snatched her from the saddle, grabbind her to him with hard, steely arms. For an instant he looked down into her face, small and white and soft, just under his.

"You little devil," he whispered. "This may be awful sudden but I can't help it." His lips caught hers, and his arms cradled her closer and closer, while an intoxicating sweetness flowed into her veins like hot wine.

As he let her go at last, a small sound like a gasp made her turn quickly. Glenda, astride her black horse, was staring at them from the side street. She quirted the animal and raced away just as Jim turned to ask, "Who was that?"

"Your sister," said Mikkie uncomfortably.

"You mean my sister-in-law." He hesitated. "My brother—her husband—was killed in the Oro Hope shaft, our mine, three months ago." He stared broodingly into the ground. Then he turned to her with a half smile. "Me, I never took to mining. I live above ground like a man, and chase cows."

They started up the street. "You mustn't hold it against Glenda because she thought you fired at me," he went on. "Been a lot of lawlessness and killing lately, most of it laid to the lone outlaw, Flint Silver. He has a way of leaving a little string of silver beads where he's robbed or killed."

Mikkie stopped short, her blue eyes wide with horror. "Silver beads! But I was talking to him, down the canyon a piece! He's the man tried to get you; I saw the sun shine on his silver vest!"

Jim Carmody gave her a deep, sharp look. "Your eyes must of played you tricks, Sixgun. He's a bold polecat, but I don't reckon even he would ride into town in broad daylight. Look, Mikkie, that's Glenda's place, on the corner." He pointed to a neat frame house set in the middle of a large yard. It was the very edge of town; behind it brush-covered hills crept to the high cliffs and precipices of the mountains. "You go in and make yourself at home. I got to ride on to my ranch. Good luck, kid—and you won't need that wicked looking gun in school." He waved and was off, his horse clattering down the street.

Mikkie, a little startled by his abrupt departure, headed for Glenda's house and after unsaddling her pony, waited on the porch. So far being a school-teacher had been pretty exciting. It was easy to forget the unpleasant part in thinking about Jim. Jim Carmody. She repeated his name softly, her cheeks glowing.

"What in the world are you mooning about?" came an amused voice. Mikkie jumped to her feet in confusion. Glenda Carmody stood on the steps, a tall, beautifully formed girl in exquisitely fitting riding clothes.

She surveyed Mikkie with black eyes plainly contemptuous. "I've been here for five minutes, watching you smiling to yourself."

Mikkie drew herself together. "I was just thinking."

Glenda swept into the house, dark head high. "I suppose thinking is safer for the rest of us than shooting!"

Mikkie followed her into the house. "I can't see any sense in my trying to stay here," she said flatly.

GLENDA whirled on her. Her black eyes flashed dangerously, and there was something cruel in the thin line of her lips. "You have nothing to say about it," she snapped. "The school board decides who's to have the privilege of boarding the school-teacher, and I happen to need the money. Another thing—I saw you making up to Jim Carmody, and I'm warning you it won't work. Jim and I have had an—understanding for some time."

Mikkie stared. "But I thought you married his brother!"

The older girl gave Mikkie a long, hard look from eyes sharp and glinting, and the cruel line of her mouth deepened like a slash. "Jim's brother Richard was my husband, which is no concern of yours. I was married to him for barely two months and now he's dead. I've known Jim since I was a child."

"I—see," said Mikkie. But she didn't. Not when she remembered how Jim had said, "So it's okay to fall in love right off, don't you think?" Not when she remembered his lips. She felt a raw-edged hollow in her stomach, but she lifted her chin and looked straight at Glenda Carmody. She found she both hated and distrusted this girl with an amazing intensity, considering how short a time she'd even known she existed.

That night she retired early. It was no fun in the sittingroom with Glenda, who sewed, tight-lipped and silent. She wasn't even pretty that way, Mikkie reflected. Glenda was the sort of girl who turned on lights and radiance and sparkle, when a man was around.

Mikkie could not sleep. She listened to the spruce branches creak against the house; she listened to the yapping of a band of coyotes on the mountainside. She did not hear Glenda come to bed—Glenda's room was just across the hall.

Presently Mikkie dozed a little; she awakened with a start. Someone was creeping furtively around the side of the house. Whoever it was stumbled; muttered an angry exclamation. Then steps sounded on the porch; now the door was opening.

Mikkie realized her forehead was wet with sweat, and her heart pounding. She let out her breath carefully, and waited. The steps were heading cautiously down the hallway. Mikkie made a leap from the bed, grabbing the gun from her holster on the bedside table, and ran into the hall.

She stopped short. It was Glenda. For a moment the two girls faced each other in silence. Then Glenda said icily, "And what is wrong with you? There are no coyotes to shoot in this house, I'll have you know."

Mikkie felt foolish. She squared her small jaws. "When I hear folks creeping around in the dark, I just wonder—that's all." She got back in bed, trembling. Just what sort of a person was this Glenda Carmody?

Mikkie spent the next three days—school did not begin until Monday—in sadly-needed studying, dreading her first day of teaching, and wondering why Jim Carmody didn't come around.

Glenda was away from the house most of the time. She saw Jim, it seemed. She told Mikkie so. She barely spoke to Mikkie, but she did tell her she'd been riding with Jim. She told her she'd had supper with Jim. And Mikkie wondered if the pinching, burning pain in her throat showed. For there was something gloating and triumphant in Glenda's dark eyes.

Sunday night Mikkie thought, desperately, "Tomorrow school starts. Then I'll be too busy to care. The days will go, fast, and soon I can go away from here—from Jim Carmody—forever."

A horse raced into the front yard; steps came running on the porch. Glenda got to her feet, her face wary, suspicious. There was a quick knock on the door, then Jim strode in.

Glenda's face relaxed. With a little cry she ran to him, threw her arms around his neck. "Jim darling! Where have you been? I've been so worried!"

Jim held her to him and stroked her shining black hair, and Mikkie stood straight and still and felt a hot, thick sickness surge through her. She tried to look away and could not.

"Sheriff Jensen and I got a tip on Silverbeads," said Jim. "We been trailing him and found nothing, as usual. No need for you to worry, Glenda."

Mikkie scowled. Glenda acted as if she hadn't seen Jim at all . . . which was in direct contradiction to what she'd told her.

"How can I help worrying," choked Glenda, clinging to him, "when we're almost sure it was he who—Richard—"

"There, there," he soothed, "you mustn't

let your mind go back to that, Glenda." He looked up and saw Mikkie. His arms fell from Glenda and he grinned, "The gun-shootin' school-ma'am! How's the education of Oxtree progressing?"

"School doesn't start until tomorrow," said Glenda, before Mikkie could open her mouth. "I hope Mikkie gets along all right, but her entrance to town was so unfortunate, Jim! People can't forget she came in shooting. Banker Webb, who is also president of the school board, you know, said he hoped we hadn't made a mistake."

"Only trouble Mikkie will have," said Jim, "will be these big boys who should be working in the mines will want to go back to school. Wouldn't mind a little more education myself," he added.

"Jim, you're so silly!" cooed Glenda, her dark eyes caressing him. "Don't frighten poor Mikkie so. She's so worried as it is. I don't think she's very happy here; she's probably left her heart back home. How about some supper, Jim? We're ready to eat."

"Got to run on. The foreman at the Oro Hope sent word he wants to see me."

Glenda's eyes filled. "Oh, Jim, must you? I hate that mine!"

"So do I," said Jim cheerfully. "But if the new vein produces enough to pay off the mortgage on the ranch, I won't hate it quite so much." His eyes sought Mikkie's. For just an instant he was the man who had kissed her and held her close. Then, waving goodbye to both girls, he was gone.

BUT Mikkie ran after him. He was already on his horse, at the gate of Glenda's yard, when he saw her. In her was the impulse to say that there was something wrong in this house of Glenda's; some strange feeling that was not good. That the real Glenda was not the Glenda he knew—charming, soft and affectionate. But that she was sour, furtive, sneaking out by herself at night, and always listening and watching.

His storm-gray eyes looked down at her and her words did not come. Spoken out loud they would need more convincing proof to uphold them. She would sound like a jealous little cat, that's all. But there was one thing she could say, and those words came tumbling out.

"Jim, you only laughed at me when I said that man trying to shoot you—the man in the silver vest—" Then, thinking she heard Glenda behind her, "My eyes were not playing tricks, Jim!"

"You still worrying about that, Six-gun?" Jim looked at her steadily. "In that case I'd advise you to turn around and go back to your home. You got too much imagination for a school-ma'am." There was a hard note in his voice that was like a whiplash in her face. "I don't think this is a good place for you, Mikkie. It was a mistake, your coming here. You better give up this teaching job and go home." He spurred his horse and was off.

Mikkie, fighting tears, stared at the ground and kicked up dirt with her boot toe. Suddenly she stooped, peering at something that glittered. Her heart seemed to stop as she picked up a dusty string with half a dozen silver beads dangling from it.

She stuffed it hastily in her shirt pocket as Glenda called sharply from the doorway, "Supper is waiting!"

The two girls ate in silence, and Mikkie kept feeling the string of silver beads burn her skin. This was something definite she could tell Jim; he'd laughed at her story, but this—this was something she could put under his nose and say, "There! I found them in the yard—Glenda's yard!"

She'd done the dishes and was about to go to her room when a horse sounded in the distance. Glenda did not move, but her face tightened, her eyes fixed on the door. The hoof beats came nearer; stopped in the yard.

Mikkie's hand went involuntarily to the pocket holding the silver beads. A chill crept up her neck as steps moved slowly across the porch and somebody knocked. Then, "Just me again, girls!" called Jim's voice.

Glenda threw open the door. Jim's bronzed face was oddly white. "Jim! What is it?" she cried.

"The Oro Hope," he said heavily. "Wrecked. Dynamited."

"Wrecked? Dynamited?" repeated Glenda faintly.

Jim's face was grim. "When I can get money to clear it out again, I don't know. It's a sure thing I haven't got it now." He drew a deep breath. "I had word from the sheriff couple days ago that some of those damn silver beads were found near the shaft house. I paid no attention; I've hated the

place. But if I'd gone up then, maybe I could have prevented this from happening. I'm sick on your account, Glenda. You been counting so on that new vein, and now it's my fault you've lost it. How can I make it up to you?"

Glenda's black eyes were shining, her mouth tender. "Silly, silly, Jim—worrying about gold when all I want is for you to be safe!" She drew close to him. Her voice was husky. "I couldn't go on—without you too, Jim dear."

Mikkie saw the tensing muscles along Jim's jaw and the flare of red that shot into his cheeks. With a sudden movement he put his arm around Glenda.

Blindly Mikkie made her way to her room. After a long time she got out a geography book. But she slammed it shut again; the light wasn't any good. The maps kept blurring and wiggling. The words didn't make sense. What difference did it make what bounded Alabama, and where the Arctic Ocean was?

She could only think of Jim standing there, drawing Glenda to him, his face against her hair.

It was a frightened-eyed teacher who faced her twenty pupils in the school house at nine o'clock in the morning, five of them burly looking boys bigger and older than herself. Mikkie cleared her throat and announced that if everybody got their spelling and arithmetic lessons without a mistake, there would be a roping contest in the afternoon.

A thundering cheer greeted the announcement, and Mikkie with relief saw nineteen students grab their books to study. The twentieth, a scrubbed-looking girl of fourteen, got up and left, stopping to inform the teacher indignantly that she was not interested in roping contests.

The contest was a huge success, and there were twenty-nine pupils in school the following morning, demanding to know what today's program would be.

"Shooting," Mikkie told them, "target shooting."

THE lessons were recited perfectly, and the pupils lined up eagerly to take turns at shooting the target the big boys had fixed up on the mountainside. They insisted that the teacher, who had won the roping contest yesterday, be first to shoot. Mikkie aimed and fired, hit the bull's-eye again and again, to the mighty cheers of her pupils. They'd gone the rounds and Mikkie with two older boys was set to shoot out a tie, when a group of horsemen came thundering up the mountain slope.

"Halt!" yelled the man with a star on his vest. "What goes on here?"

Mikkie looked up into the irate face of Sheriff Jensen. Next to him was the puffing, red-faced Mr. Webb, banker and president of the school board. Behind him rode Glenda and Jim.

"What does this mean?" panted Mr. Webb, glaring.

"It's part of our lessons," said Mikkie staunchly. "In a country like this kids need shooting lessons more than spelling."

"That's not what you're hired for!" roared the sheriff. "You stick to readin' and writin', young woman! Git back to your desks, you kids! I got enough to worry about, with silver-bead outlaws runnin' loose, without tendin' to a bunch of gun-shootin' school brats!"

"This is outrageous, outrageous," puffed Mr. Webb.

The children obeyed sulkily, and Mikkie planned frantically just how she could get another job before Ruth found out she was fired from this one. Without meaning to, her glance flew to Jim, but she found no help there. His sombrero shaded his face; his mouth was tightly set.

"Miss Harris meant no harm," spoke up Glenda sweetly. "She just doesn't understand our ways here yet. Let's forget about this, Sheriff Jensen, and have a good time at the spelling-bee tonight."

"Spelling-bee?" echoed Mikkie, trying to hide her dismay.

"I'm having a party for you tonight," Glenda explained, smiling. "I meant to keep it as a surprise, but with this happening, guess I'll have to tell you. Everybody's coming, and I thought for a teacher a spelling-bee would be the thing to have. Just in fun, of course," she added, "but we'll count on you, Mikkie, to spell down the whole town!"

Mikkie was speechless. She scarcely realized that the group, except Jim, rode off. He dismounted slowly.

"Don't you think you've had enough of school-teaching, Sixgun?" he asked sober-

ly. "Whoever told you you was a schoolma'am, was just joking. Besides this mining camp is no place for a lone girl just now. I'd feel a lot better if you cleared out and went back where you belong."

Mikkie was silent. Mikkie was choking back the ache, the hurt, the ripped-up hopes that even yet Jim would go back, somehow, to their first meeting: those wild, wonderful minutes and the love that had been for all its suddenness so real and deep.

High on the mountain somewhere a powder blast thundered dimly; echoed and re-echoed. A wind rustled the silver aspen leaves; stirred the straight, dark spruce branches.

Jim's voice went on, and it seemed to be part of the breeze, gentle and slow. "You see, Sixgun, Glenda has to come first. She depends on me. I blame myself for her husband getting killed—the Oro Hope was my responsibility too and I should never have let him work there alone. Now it's my fault we lost the new vein—lost it for a long time, if not forever. I got to take care of Glenda; she's got nobody else."

Through a blur of pain Mikkie remembered the Glenda that she, not Jim, knew. She remembered the cruel mouth, the sharp, flashing eyes. She remembered Glenda sneaking around the house in the night; out on some mission that was secret and dark. And she remembered a dusty string of silver beads.

She tried to speak. Her mouth was so dry, her throat all choked up.

"Don't say anything, Mikkie," Jim went on, his voice deepening huskily. "I wish things was different. I'd like to tame a certain curly-headed little wildcat. And I'll be remembering a long time about a kiss—just one." He broke off sharply. When he spoke again, his voice was different: light and careless.

"I wouldn't count too much on keeping the teaching job, Sixgun, unless you're an extra smart speller. I reckon you understand that everybody will be waiting to hear if the new teacher, that rides into town firing at coyotes and has shooting contests in school, knows how to spell."

Mikkie nodded, unable to speak. She looked long into his lean, bronze face, remembering how the planes of it had blurred as his lips came close to hers, how the darkness of his eyes had glowed with swiftly dancing lights, with deep burning fires. She looked long, feeling that it was the last time.

He rode off swiftly, to catch up with the group below. Again she'd failed to tell him about the beads she'd found, but it was just as well. They meant only that at some time the bandit had ridden by, dropped them, tauntingly maybe, in Glenda's gate.

BY THE time school was out, Mikkie's plans were made. There was no sense in staying for a spelling match that would only reveal her as a fraud. She would tell Glenda, leave at once. But when she got home the kitchen was filled with women baking pies and doughnuts; men were bringing up benches and chairs from town, dragging in wood for the huge bonfire in the yard. Mikkie hesitated.

It would be simpler to slip away while the party was in full swing. She'd have her horse saddled and waiting up the trail a piece.

The guests began arriving before dark. Two fiddlers and a guitarist were playing lively tunes while the young people danced in the house and on the porch. In the yard Sheriff Jensen had lighted the big pile of wood and logs, and giant pots of coffee were already cooking.

Mikkie found herself dancing with spurred cowboys and roughly booted young miners while the older guests stared at the little golden-haired teacher in frank curiosity, several with hostility and distrust.

The moon came up, sending gliding ribbons of silver over the crowded yard. And suddenly it was Jim who was dancing with Mikkie. She set her teeth together hard and decided not to feel, but she began to tremble, and there was a hard, bitter knot in her throat.

He drew her closer and closer, until her slim body was pressed to his, and the moonlight wove a magic cloud about them so that they were alone in the faraway lovely world it made. Mikkie felt the stinging of tears behind her eyes, and a throbbing happiness that was all the sweeter because it meant good-by.

The instant the music stopped, she slipped out of his arms. Now was time for her to go. Threading her way swiftly through the crowd, she heard Mr. Webb announce that the event of the evening, the spelling

contest, was about to begin. Mikkie fled to the back of the yard where she could slip, unseen, to her horse.

Running along the narrow trail, she heard someone coming toward her. She stopped short, looking up into the face of the tawny-haired rider. Her eyes dropped instantly to his vest. She choked back a gasp. The moonlight had caught a silvery gleam, as of beads shining.

"Well, it's the little school-ma'am!" he greeted pleasantly, in his soft voice. "You giving 'em book-learning in Oxtree?"

Mikkie's mouth was dry. "Yes," she managed. "The school is doing fine." Her terrified mind spun around one thought: it was Jim this silver-bead bandit had tried to shoot the other day. Tonight, if he tried again, he might succeed.

"Don't work the kids too hard," he said. He waited for her to go on in the direction she'd been going; she knew, even in her panic, that she'd better not change that direction now. Forcing a smile to her stiff lips, she walked on carelessly. Presently when she no longer heard his steps she risked a glance over her shoulder: the trail seemed still and empty.

Mikkie figured swiftly. By cutting down through brush and trees and piled-up boulders, she would come into Glenda's front yard. She plunged headlong down the slope; branches slapped her face; thorny bushes tore skin from her arms. She stumbled on the rocky earth, once turning her ankle so severely that a fiery pain shot up through her leg. But it didn't matter: the outlaw was closer to Jim than she was. It was all Mikkie could think of.

Face scratched and blouse torn, she jumped from a high granite boulder at last into the yard. She headed for the bon-fire where she'd seen Jim last, but the people, jammed up for the spelling match, stopped her. She tried to squeeze through, pushing, pulling, edging into the tightly packed crowd.

Somebody was yelling. It sounded like the long-haired miner who'd accused her the first day of being an accomplice of Flint Silver. "She ain't no school-teacher! She's scared to spell! She come here to spy for that silver-bead outlaw, that's what! Where'd she run to now, hey? Where did she? Is she actin' like a good school-ma'am should?"

"Let me through! Let me through!" sobbed Mikkie, pounding her small fists on a cowboy's broad back. Astonished, he moved to one side, letting her race out across the open space toward the fire.

"There she is! Now git her!" yelled the miner. "Make her spell! See if she can spell silver bead! Maybe she can spell silver bead!"

"No, no," gasped Mikkie, her gaze searching wildly for Jim. There he was, by the fire. "Wait—not now—" Her voice froze. Through the tall scrub oak behind the fire she'd seen a movement. The firelight had focused, a brief instant, on something that reflected a sparkle.

Mikkie sped around the bulky figure of the outraged president of the school board and took the ten steps to the fire in three. Snatching a towel from Glenda to protect her hands, she grabbed the giant pot of coffee and hurled the boiling water through the branches where she'd seen the gleam of silver.

There was a shrill howl of anguish. The people stood stunned, too astounded to think or move, but Jim Carmody took one leap through the scrub oak. After him went Mikkie.

Somebody screamed as a gun shot exploded.

The gun was smoking in the hand of the man who lay writhing in pain from the scalding coffee, but the bullet had sped harmlessly into the sky—for Jim Carmody had plunged upon that figure to grab the gun wrist a split second before the explosion.

Jim stood erect now and looked down at Mikkie, while the people crowded about wonderingly, staring.

"Our gun-shooting school-ma'am maybe can't spell," he said dryly. "But she's good at hunting out coyotes. She just located Flint Silver for us."

IT WAS easy, in the confusion following the capture of the famous bandit, for Mikkie to slip away to her horse, mount and start quietly down the dark trail toward the plains beyond Oxtree.

Mikkie's chin was high, and she blinked rapidly. She was not crying, but she was, she admitted, the next thing to it. Probab-

ly, with time, it wouldn't hurt to think of Jim Carmody. She could even laugh, later on, at the surprise Silver must have felt when that hot coffee came flooding through the scrub oak.

But right now she was the next thing to crying. Her throat was tight with it.

The old trail crossed the main street of Oxtree just below the big store where she'd first met Jim Carmody. She could almost imagine that there in the moonlight he waited, his hat pushed to the back of his tow head rakishly, his eyes laughing at her, his lips teasing. She caught her breath with a gasp and pulled hard on the reins—for there *was* Jim Carmody, grinning, sitting his saddle sideways.

He caught hold of her bridle. "Where you going, Sixgun?"

"Home," said Mikkie. "Like you told me to."

His voice was very soft. "Suppose home could be in a different place, Mikkie? On a ranch not so far from Oxtree?"

She shook her head. "You mean with you and Glenda. No, Jim, I reckon I'll go back where I come from. I came here the wrong way, pretending to be something I'm not at all, but now I'm leaving, and Oxtree can get a real school-teacher."

"Oxtree will never have a finer teacher than its gun-shooting school-ma'am," he said. "Mikkie, I thought I was honor-bound to stand by my brother's widow, and I was giving up the only girl I ever loved because I figured Glenda needed me. But if you'd stayed up there a minute longer, you'd understand why I'm free now—free to tell you I love you, and aim to keep you.

"Glenda went into hysterics when she thought Flint Silver was dead. She was in cahoots with him to get the Oro Hope and my ranch."

"But—she was planning to marry you! gasped Mikkie.

"Sure. That way the mine and ranch would be hers legally. But I don't figure my life would be worth more than my brother's was—once she married me. And Silver, I guess, was intending not even to let her marry me; he was going to end me tonight."

Mikkie began to shudder. "Here now," said Jim roughly, "none of that." He lifted her to him. "What's the matter, Sixgun? You worried about that spelling match? Honey, you don't need to spell, because you're not a teacher any more. You're my girl, my rip-roaring, hell-raising little six-gun sweetheart."

Mikkie hid her face against his shoulder and let the happiness flood her. "That's good," she sighed. "Because about all I can spell is J-i-m."

"You better learn your last name too," said Jim. "Carmody is right hard for some folks to spell." And then he tilted her face to his, gently, and found her lips.

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STARLIGHT TRAIL TO TROUBLE

Rather than go back East with her mean uncle who had made a drudge of her, young Kathie decided to leave his covered wagon—and risk a desperate dash through redskin territory.

CONSCIOUS of the way the soldier was staring at her, Kathie Repp dipped water from the wooden barrel strapped to the side of the battered wagon and rinsed the pans. She had watched him ride up this noon when Uncle Matt Dolson stopped the wagon across Red River on the rim of the Indian Territory as they headed back east to Kentucky from Texas.

The soldier had been assigned to escort their wagon back through the Indian country. He was tall and the sun had tanned his long, high-boned face the color of the saddle he sat against now as he cleaned his rifle.

As he stared at her, Kathie was conscious of her tub-worn drab dress, linsey-woolsey, washed until it was shiny. Aunt Clara forbade pretty clothes for Kathie. "Them are plenty good to work in," she had said. "It's best you remember who you are and what you are so you won't be gettin' fancy notions in that head of yours."

But Kathie had a personal beauty that plain clothes seemed to emphasize. Her firm young body made the dress look as though it had been painted on with soft, full strokes.

"Kathie!" Aunt Clara's voice rasped through the canvas of the wagon. "You goin' to take all day washin' them dishes? There's plenty more chores to be did."

Kathie's small hands tensed in the tepid water and her slender back stiffened. For a moment, her berry-brown eyes filled with resentment. "I'm coming, ma'm."

The soldier put down his rifle and walked over. He gestured toward the wagon with his thumb. "She's been ordering you around ever since I got here. Is it always like that?"

Kathie looked away from him. "My aunt—means well." Her troubles were nothing to discuss with a stranger. The hardship since her father's death in Texas and the decision of her aunt and uncle to pull up stakes and take her back East with them; the way they treated her and made her do most of the work—all those trials and indignities flashed through Kathie's mind. But trouble had taught her to endure hardship without complaint, to face up to life and take it as it came.

"Let me help." He took the rough cloth.

Their fingers touched and the warmth of that momentary contact was like standing in the sun.

"The name's Cunningham," the soldier said. "Larry Cunningham—but most folks call me High."

Kathie's eyes measured his height. His chin would just about come opposite her lips. *Unless I stood tiptoe.* "Have you been here long—in the West?"

"Served my full hitch of service here. Got only six months to go and I'm being transferred East for that." He looked down at his hands. "Least I am if nothing spoils my record before the request papers go through."

"You sound anxious."

High grinned. "I am." He hesitated a second. "You see, my girl's back East—in Boston. There's another fellow back there and—well, it's one of those things.

By Lillian Lane

"Indians," whispered High. "They'll follow us. . . ."

I've just got to be there fast. I mean it."

He would have a girl. Anyone as handsome as High would have a girl someplace. She might have realized that. Kathie could imagine her: sleek and dressed in the best city clothes.

"Trouble is," he went on. "Ethel and I—weren't really engaged or anything. I didn't rightly know until I was out here awhile how terrible lonesome a man can get—without anybody." He said it as though he were thinking aloud, and had wanted to tell somebody about it for a long time. "I figured on getting a little spread of my own in Texas when my hitch was up. But Ethel—she won't come West."

Kathie saw conflict in his eyes. She followed his glance across the rolling brown-green of the open plain, stretched out full length to the hills that touched the bending sky. "I don't want to go East," she said. "It's so beautiful here. So—free—and—"

"Kathie!" Her Uncle Matt poked his bearded face out of the back flap of the wagon and glowered. "Them dishes is done enough. Git in here." He shifted hard, bloodshot eyes toward High. "And you, soldier—you keep away from the girl."

Kathie saw High's chin lift, watched a hard answering look fill his eyes. His hands clenched into fists. Then he closed his eyes and, slowly, his fingers relaxed. "If that's how you want it, Dolson." He swung around and strode away.

He's thinking of his transfer papers. He's afraid of trouble with Uncle Matt because of them, afraid Uncle Matt will report him and spoil his record.

Kathie lifted herself into the wagon, wrenched her arm free from Uncle Matt's rough grasp.

THE slow, grinding trip East across Indian Territory became almost unbearable by the end of the second day. The wind and the dust had sanded Uncle Matt's temper to a point. He drank frequently from the wooden keg beside his pallet. Aunt Clara sat silent and brooding, the sweat pouring from her fat chin.

High had kept to himself since the first day. Often, when she had been outside the wagon doing her chores, Kathie saw him looking at her, that hard conflict still deep in his eyes. Several times, she caught a look of hate and revulsion as High regarded her Uncle Matt.

The two men exchanged few words. High told Uncle Matt that they had to be careful when they reached the pass. "The Indians have been making trouble. They won't attack the wagon. Most of them are behaving themselves. It's only a few bad ones. But stay close to the wagon and keep the women close. The bad ones will do anything if they think they can get away without having the blame pinned on them direct."

Uncle Matt only grunted.

They made camp the last night near the end of the territory. Tomorrow, High would leave them and they would go their own way. Kathie helped Uncle Matt stake the two horses and unhitch the oxen from the wagon tongue. He had been drinking even more than usual.

When they had finished their supper of salt beef and hard biscuit, Aunt Clara told Kathie, as if she had been making plans for a long time; "When we git to Kentucky, Kathie, your Uncle Matt and me has decided it's best fer you to be put out to work. We'll find a good home fer you. Then you're on your own. We done our best."

"No." Kathie stood up. "You can't do that. Why that's—like selling a slave. I'm your own flesh and blood."

"Shet up!" Uncle Matt lashed the words at her. "Don't back talk to your aunt, girl. Think we want to go on carin' fer you, furnishin' you our food? You ought to be grateful we're fixin' up a means of livin' fer you an'—"

Kathie turned on him. "You're fixing it up so you'll get something out of it. I know that much. You're not giving me anything unless you get something out of it." Her voice rose. "That's why you brought me East—to sell me like a slave."

"Shet your mouth!" Uncle Matt sprang to his feet. His hands gripped her arms so hard they hurt. "You're doin' what you're told."

"I won't!" Kathie's head tossed defiantly. "I—I'll run away!"

He dropped his hands from her arms. His mouth twisted. "So you'll run away?" he mocked. His coarse fingers unbuckled his belt and he coiled the leather around his fat hand. "I'll learn you!"

Kathie shrank back. The belt cracked against her legs. She couldn't hold in the scream.

It stopped him for a minute.

She heard the quick, hard beat of a horse's hoofs outside.

Uncle Matt grabbed her arm. "Say anythin' to him and I'll kill you, girl. He cain't help you none. He cain't do nothin' but make trouble for himself." He strapped his belt back into place.

High ripped back the canvas flap. "I heard a scream. Was that you—Kathie?"

She looked at him and then at Uncle Matt. She knew here uncle was right. High couldn't help her without getting into trouble that would cost him his transfer to go back East to the girl he was going to marry.

"I—thought I saw a pack rat. She made up the lie quickly.

Uncle Matt took over. "What right you got to come bustin' into our wagon like this, soldier?"

High looked at Kathie again before he said: "I got the right to keep order."

"I'll keep the order in this wagon." Uncle Matt dismissed him bluntly.

"If you're all right, Kathie—"

"Yes." She didn't look at him. "Yes—I'm all right."

She listened to High ride away.

Uncle Matt's mood was spent. "Git to sleep, girl. You got to rise early to help me hitch."

KATHIE obeyed him. But she had decided. *I will run away!* Anyplace would be better than going the rest of the way East with them, now that they had revealed their purpose. She rubbed the red sore mark on her legs. Uncle Matt's temper would know no bounds once they were away from High's protection.

Kathie waited. It seemed like hours that she waited, listening to Uncle Matt and Aunt Clara, her uncle's deep snore and her aunt's restless tossing. Slowly, an inch at a time, she eased herself toward the back of the wagon.

She pulled herself up over the backboard and dropped to the ground, standing there a moment, listening for any sound that would indicate they had been disturbed.

She made her way to the horses, unlooped the rope from the picket stake and walked with the blue roan mare a hundred yards before swinging herself up to the animal's bare back.

At the edge of the high brush that skirted the hill, she looked back. She would have to ride all night. Where, didn't matter. She would find some sanctuary.

She stiffened. Squinting back across the moonlit plain, she saw a racing movement. At first, she thought it was a shadow made on the ground by the passing of a cloud across the moon. Then she realized it was another horse and rider.

She wheeled her own horse, plunged into the brush, fought to climb the hill, breaking a trail as she went. But the horse made slow, painful progress. She swung down, felt out the way on foot, thrusting her body through the high brush, leading the horse.

"Kathie!" It was High. He had seen her now. There was no way of hiding.

He climbed down and ran through the brush to her. "Kathie—have you gone mad, riding out here alone and—"

"Please—go back. Pretend you didn't find me. Please. I can't go East with them. I won't."

He took her arm. "I don't know what's come over you, but you are going back—and now."

She struggled to free herself from the hold he had on her arm. "You don't understand. You don't know what—"

"I know you're in danger here alone. It's my duty to take you back."

"So—your duty! That's it. You don't care about what happens to me. All you care about is getting your transfer."

His look stopped her. 'If I didn't care what happened to you," he said slowly, "I'd leave you here at the mercy of these hills. Where do you think you can go without food or water, without anything?"

"I don't care. It doesn't matter where I go as long as it's away from them."

He took her arm. "Climb back up on that horse."

Kathie dug in her heels. "I won't!"

High put both his arms around her, started to lift her off the ground. She kicked her legs, hammered her fists at him. His arms were strong, tight around her. His face was close.

High's head came down. His lips took hers. There was some of the almost savage, unspent struggling there had been between them in his kiss at first. He took his lips away and there was surprise and doubt in his eyes. He kissed her again.

Kathie stopped kicking. The fists that had been pounding against his chest slowly climbed around his neck. Her fingers found the soft curl of short hair at the back of his neck, pressed against his head. She whispered his name.

Abruptly, as if the whisper had broken the spell, he put her down. His words were tight, unsure. "Trying that won't do you any good. You're going back."

"Me!" You're saying that I did that? You think that I—"

"Quiet!" His sudden, sharp command silenced her. His head lifted and his body went tense.

Kathie heard nothing at first. But the look on High's face was enough to keep her quiet. Sudden concern had pulled his forehead into a tight frown. He stood silent, still listening.

And then she heard it. The noise sounded like the very slow ticking of two clocks, very far away. It was a regular beat, rhythmic, spaced. As it grew louder she identified the sound as hoofbeats.

"Indians," whispered High. "They must have been watching the wagon day and night, waiting for someone to stray from it. If they catch us here in the woods where nobody can pin blame on them for what they do—" He put his arm around Kathie, crouched down with her. "We'll have to crawl. They'll follow us . . . We'll leave the horses here. That may be what they're after. I can't take the chance of fighting it out, having you hurt."

She followed him through the brush on her hands and knees. When it thinned out slightly, she crawled up beside him. "We'll make the ridge," he said. "We'll wait there until dawn. It's only a few hours now."

At the ridge, she moved up next to him again. "See what I mean now," he asked, "about running away?" She shivered slightly, lying beside him, the two of them covered by the brush that moved gently in the wind. High looked down at her, put his arm around her. "If there were some other way, Kathie—that you didn't have to go back—"

She shook her head. "You have your duty," she said quietly. "I have no right to ruin things for you."

High swore softly. "Dolson was mistreating you tonight, wasn't he—when I heard you scream?"

Kathie didn't answer him.

She lay still beside him, her head sheltered by the firmness of his shoulder and she closed her eyes. When the wind touched her lips, she felt again the bitter-sweetness of High's kiss. She felt his arm around her. And she thought: "They belong to Ethel. He belongs to Ethel." Her hand touched his shoulder, lightly, as if she were afraid she had lost him already. *But tonight—this one night is mine.*

And, after awhile, she slept peaceful, innocently, secure in his arms from Indians and from the future—secure for tonight while she dreamed.

T DAWN, High aroused her. Her horse was nowhere in sight on the slope below them. But High's stallion was still there, peacefully cropping tufts of grass that poked up from the rocks less than a hundred yards from where he had left him. "Smart Indians," High said. "They saw my horse had an army saddle and guessed it was army-branded and could be traced. They took yours."

They started down. High took her hand to help her over the rocks. As she walked ahead of him, Kathie felt him watching the way she moved through the brush. Her torn skirt caught on a branch. High knelt and started to untangle it. His fingers stopped. "That red mark on your leg." He stood. "How did that get there, Kathie?"

She shook her head. "I—don't know."

"Dolson lashed you. That's what made you scream."

She knew she couldn't lie to him. "It was the first time. He was—drunk. He didn't mean it."

High looked at her as though he hadn't heard her. "You were right," he said. "You can't go back. I won't take you back to that."

She shut her eyes. "There—is no other way, High. They know you came after me. They'd expect you to find me."

"There might be a way." He took her hand. "Kathie, I've been trying to think

something straight all night while we were together there."

Her head lifted and her eyes went wide. "Don't—please, High. Don't pity me. Don't pretend anything just because you're sorry for me. That—would spoil everything."

She turned and went on down the hill, swung up to the saddle of his horse.

He stood, looking up at her for a moment. Hesitantly, he climbed up into the saddle in front of her, lifted the reins.

They rode slowly across the flat toward the wagon. "You'll be getting your papers," she told him. "You'll go back East—to Ethel, the way you planned."

And I'll have this to remember. That single kiss, the security of his arms, our night together. With that locked tight in my heart, I'll face up somehow to whatever comes.

Uncle Matt and Aunt Clara were both standing beside the wagon, watching them as they rode up. High helped Kathie down, explained to Dolson briefly about the Indians. "We had to wait until dawn."

"Indians!" Uncle Matt made a harsh joke of the word. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Watch your mouth, Dolson!" High stepped forward.

Uncle Matt looked past him at Kathie. "You come crawling back here—"

High's fist shot out. The smashing power of the lunge caught Uncle Matt hard on the side of his jaw, sent him reeling back against the wheel of the wagon.

Aunt Clara screamed: "They'll throw you out of the army for this!"

"Quiet, woman!" High reached down and jerked Dolson to his feet. "Now you listen, both of you. Get into that wagon and get going. Keep going until you're clear of the line. It's four miles." He pointed. "Straight ahead."

"I'll turn you in," Dolson sputtered.

"You say one damn word and you'll wind up in Federal prison on slave charges for the way you've been treating this girl." He put his arm around Kathie. "She's staying with me—understand?"

Dolson spat on the ground. "Good riddance—"

High pulled back his fist. "Get!"

Kathie watched the wagon roll away across the plain. High's arm was still around her. "I'll find someplace to go, High," she said softly. "I won't make any trouble for you."

He started laughing. But his laugh was tender, gentle—as gentle as a kiss. "Don't you understand yet, Kathie? You've *got* a place to go. That is if you don't mind marrying me and living at the fort until I can get that little spread I always planned on and—"

"Oh, High—High. Don't say it if you don't mean it."

He kissed her. "Think I'm pretending now?" He kissed her hard and he kept on kissing her. "It's what I've always wanted, to stay here in the West. I was lonely, I guess. I knew last night when I first kissed you that I wasn't really in love with her. But I couldn't think it straight until I saw Dolson. He was a quitter, heading East. And then I knew about me—about us and—"

Kathie stopped his words. She reached up and pulled down his head and kissed him and stopped his words with the full warmth of her lips.

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Beware a Heart Doctor

By Brian Waggoner

Vivacious Victory Hayden had to convince her miner sweetheart that they couldn't build their love on the ashes of another romance.

IN APRIL Victory Hayden knew she was in love with Whit Fanton. By early May she began wondering what she could do about it. For Whit, though his merry blue eyes lighted up, and his expressive mouth always broke into a smile at sight of her, had never spoken of marriage, hadn't even mentioned love.

Of course, a girl has ways of knowing when a boy likes her, but just the same she wants to hear the words right out.

She sat with her straight little back against tall Balance Rock, the full skirt of her cotton dress fanning out like a great blue flower with her sunny head as its heart, and looked at his six-foot length that sprawled gracefully on a carpet of pine and balsam needles, his head upheld with hand and elbow.

Her fingers were busy fashioning a chain of pine needle loops. When it was done she was going to drop it around Whit's neck. And if she wasn't careful she would find herself stooping to kiss the top of his dark, tousled head. She would try not to. A girl should wait modestly for a boy to make the first move.

But this morning she was bursting with news, wonderful news, concerning the ugly old spite-fence that stood between the Fanton place and Aunt Emma's, her home. She frowned down upon it, the hideous grey scar that ran from Lantern Creek to the rocky bluff. Balance Rock was also on the line. From there on it was marked by a stake-and-rider fence half covered with berry vines.

Victory had always hated the fence. Now, since Whit had come to live with his father, she doubly hated it. It was like a living, determined obstacle that was keeping them apart. She wanted it down. And this morning, at her insistence, Aunt Em had given in.

"I guess it's served its time," Emma Hayden had said, with a thought-filled glance at the girl she had mothered so long. "A fence is built, Babe, to keep something in or shut something out. Now—well, it might as well come down. We'll set at it at once."

"What was it built to shut out or in, Auntie?" Vic had asked with keen curiosity. "Why, we don't need it any longer, do we?"

"Oh—it was put up to shut out sight of something that was sure to happen . . . but didn't," Emma replied in riddles. "It's like Lantern Creek down there. Folks said it couldn't go dry. But it has. It's dry as a burnt cracker right now. Ben Fanton has to wheelbarrow every speck of ore from his two-bit mine down to the river to wash out the gold." A peculiar smile touched her thin straight lips. "He knows better than to ask me to run water in the ditch that crosses my land."

There it was! That old, bitter dislike of Whit's father. "Oh, Aunt Em! Why do you hate him so?" Vic exclaimed anxiously. It was so important, now, for her aunt and Whit's father to be friendly. "Don't you think if you saw more of him—knew him better—"

"I know him well enough," Emma stated curtly. "As for seein', you can screw your eyelids down and still see some things."

She was a queer mixture, thought Victory. Crusty outside and soft as custard underneath. Aunt Em would do anything for anyone except Fanton. But she had agreed to tear down the fence and Vic vowed, with Whit's help, to bring peace about. That fence was a symbol. With it would go all grudges and hatreds.

Now, here with Whit, she longed to tell him her news. But he ought to say something first, make some sign that he loved her. Then she would tell him.

With her heart thrumming happily she leaned through a mesh of golden sunshine and dropped the fragile chain over his head.

Vic didn't like at all—what she saw.

He sat erect so suddenly that it scared her. His hands covered hers so tightly that a pulse started in her throat like the clapper in a bell.

"Vic! I'm goin' to do something about us!" he declared. "I'm not goin' to go on this way any longer!"

"Why—what do you mean, Whit?"

"I mean I'm tired of havin' a river or a rock or a danged old fence always between us. I don't want to have to sneak up here to see you just to keep from makin' my dad or your aunt mad." He leaned closer and went on tersely, "Victory, oh, you're so little and so sweet. I'm lovin' you—"

VICTORY sat for a long silent moment letting the poignant sweetness of his words flow through her. Whit loved her. It changed everything in the world. Her amber eyes smiled at the old fence. It had failed to keep them apart. She saw Ben Fanton's small house, in bad repair since Ben was building a new and larger home nearer his mine up Lantern Creek a ways.

Her Aunt's sturdy, five-room log cabin with its sheltering pines and a flower-filled yard that ran down to the banks of the now dry creek. East of it were rows and rows of cultivated berry vines, its fruit now turning in the sunshine. Those berries, together with the sewing Emma did for the town folks, was their means of support.

She loved it all with sudden passionate intensity. Every stick and stone was tinged with gold—because of Whit had just said. A soft little sigh passed her lips. "Do you, Whit?" she whispered. "Do you really love me?"

His answer was to bend his dark head until his lips found hers in a kiss that completed the miracle. Vic's satisfied little heart set to a rhythm of steady strokes that measured off the golden moments while her sunny head rested against Whit's shoulder and he talked of his boyhood.

He had lived in a town down the valley with his mother and her sister, seldom seeing his father who had come back to his home and mine on Lantern Creek.

"My aunt kept Mother from coming here," he added. "She claimed Dad didn't want us. Mother was always under her thumb, but I wasn't. And so when my mother died I wrote and asked him if I could come. I remembered how he had always paid well for our keep and it didn't jibe with what Aunt Carrie was always sayin' about him neglectin' us. I didn't want a town job. I was interested in mining like he was. Besides—" he laughed a little at himself— "I was gettin' afraid of her managin' ways. There was a girl next door—"

"Oh!" Vic sat up and gave him a round-eyed questioning gaze. "Oh! So there was a girl was there!"

His face reddened. "It didn't amount to anything, Vic," he said. "She was a nice girl, and pretty, too. Only I wasn't wantin' to get married. When Dad's letter come, askin' me to shake a leg gettin' here, and about the mine lookin' so good and him needin' me, why, you bet I lit out."

He was afraid he would marry her if he stayed. He must have liked her. I wonder if he still thinks about her, were the thoughts that flashed through Victory's mind, disturbing her.

Whit's arm tightened around her drawing her back to him. "We hit it off from the first day," he continued. "I didn't find any sign of the woman Aunt Carrie said caused him to leave his own wife. There was only your aunt's place near with a mile-high fence in between them. And it didn't take long to know he hated her."

Victory felt her neck stiffen. That didn't set well. Aunt Em probably had good reason not to like Ben Fanton. "Oh," Vic said crisply. "So he hates my aunt. Well, I'd like to know why!"

"I don't know why, but I know he does. When I wanted to tear down the fence that hems us in he said to let it alone. Said some things was better lookin' when you couldn't see them."

Vic slid from his arms like buttered lightening, forgetting all about her news. "My aunt built that fence and I guess he'd better not try to tear it down!" she exclaimed hotly, the insult to her aunt rankling. "I can see now why she built it. I'll bet after he goes to live farther up Lantern Creek it comes down fast enough."

Whit whistled in surprise. "Great Maude in the Morning!" he ejaculated. "You're a loyal little spit-fire. Listen, sweet, I wasn't meanin' to run down your aunt. She could not be half as queer as mine is. Only—aunts

seem to want to run things for people and I've been afraid she might keep us apart. You won't let her do that, Vic?"

Victory held his tanned face in her hands and kissed him and was ashamed of her outbreak. But she said, "You're wrong about Aunt Em, dear. She said we could tear down the fence. And I'll bet," she added, with a glance at the six-foot dry ditch that ran between Balance Rock and the bluff, "that she would let you run water to your mine if you'd ask her."

Whitfield shook his head. "Dad wouldn't let me do that. There's something about him where she's concerned that I won't monkey with. But we sure need water till it rains in the mountains and the creek begins to flow."

Vic's eyes brightened with an idea. "Whit," she exclaimed, "why don't you go ahead and open the ditch! It's been so long since anybody used it that you'd have to do a little work on it. At the intake and maybe here at the Rock. But when the water is really running in it I'm sure neither Aunt Em or your Dad will object. Do you suppose," she speculated eagerly, "they could have quarreled because they were in love with each other—like we are?"

He answered soberly. "No. I don't. But we know they love us. And since she's willin' to tear the fence down maybe this would be a way to work things out. Say!" he hopped to his feet and helped Vic up. "I'm goin' right away to open that ditch. You're a smart girl to have thought of it!"

His praise made Vic glow. She kissed him good-bye and vowed to keep Emma away until the right time.

She planned to give two days to softening her aunt by dropping little hints and suggestions. She had not counted on the thrifty streak in Emma Hayden that sent her to the hills that afternoon.

"The wild berries will ripen first. We'll go up in the hills and pick," she told the dismayed girl, as she put on sunbonnet and gloves and took up a paper-lined basket. "I want to get the first ones into town because they bring the best price. The Emporium got in a new piece of dress goods that I've got my heart set on. It's time you was havin' something right pretty. Get your basket and come on, Babe."

"But—but, Aunt Em," Victory stammered. "You don't need to go. I'll pick the berries. You stay here—and start on the fence. I'm so anxious to have it down."

EMMA tied the strings of her bonnet and looked from between its deep, slatted sides. "Victory, I've thought better of that. I wooled over it while I was ironing and I don't see how I can give in like that. Ben Fanton would crow his head off."

"But you promised! I'd rather have the fence down than all the goods in the Emporium! Aunt Em! what did Mr. Fanton ever do that was so bad you built that hideous fence, and won't even let him have the river water."

"The old horse-face," Emma muttered. "I wouldn't give him a drink if his tongue was on fire. Some men are a grievance on this earth. Come on," she added briskly. "We'd best both pick berries or they'll be mushin' on the vines."

Vic held back. What if they ran into Whit at the ditch! "I—I've got a headache." she pretended. "Let's wait till the cool of the morning to go."

Emma stripped off a glove and placed her hand on the girl's flushed cheek. "You've got a full degree of fever," she announced with concern. "You lie down with a wet rag on your head, Babe. I can pick the berries myself."

Vic grabbed basket and bonnet. If nothing could stop Aunt Em she was going along. If they met Whit she would do what she could.

As they passed the cultivated berry vines

The winning last line of the November PIN-UP GIRL Limerick Contest . . .

For the chance of a dance with this vixen so fair,
Any cowpoke would ride for miles;
And should he catch the flower she tossed in the air
Their marriage would be in the files.

was won by Clifford Rose, Garden Grove, Iowa.

Emma appraised them and said, "We'll have a hundred-dollar crop this season."

Then they climbed the bluff and saw the ditch. A two-foot stream of roily water snaked along between its dusty banks. Emma slid the basket up her arm, placed her hands on her hips, and surveyed it with disfavor.

"So he's turned to thievin' has he!" she observed acidly. "A sneakin' water across my land! Well, I'll see it don't do him any good if I have to drink it all. Now I wonder—"

Victory's wide, startled eyes followed her aunt's gaze up and down the banks. No Whit was in sight, thank heaven. But he had been there, as was evidenced in some freshly spaded places, mostly around the Rock.

Emma put down her basket and approached the Rock.

"Just look how he's undermined it," she said, peering at its base. "A grasshopper could kick it over. If we was to pry out some of them stones and push. Come here, Babe, and help me."

"Oh, let him have the water, Aunt Em!" Vic begged. "He does need it, badly, and we don't."

"Then why wasn't he man enough to come and ask for it?" Emma demanded sharply.

She grubbed and poked industriously for a while. Then she placed a pole in Vic's hand and said, "Now help me push. Push hard and she may go over."

Vic's pushing was feeble. But what she lacked was more than made up by Emma's angry vigor. A few grunts and shoves and the big Rock left its ancient moorings. Slowly but surely it toppled sidewise and landed with a soft splash squarely in the ditch, a firm and effective dam from bank to bank. Not a drop of water could pass it.

"There!" Emma dusted off her gloves complacently. "I guess that'll show him. Come on, Babe, let's go after them berries."

THEY returned hours later, their baskets brimming with red luscious berries to find the ditch bank full. Six feet of deep muddy backwater lay between them and the home trail down the only passable place on the bluff. There was no crossing between them and the river, either. If they went around the Rock on the other side they would be on Fanton land.

"Well, I do declare!" Emma fumed, at a loss. "I'd a thought that dry ground would a soaked up water better than that!"

Now, thought Victory, If Whit would only come now, and be sweet and helpful in a way that would save Emma's face about the predicament she had got herself into, everything might clear up.

But still he failed to show up. Emma pointed to the Rock with some pride. "We done a good job movin' that. A dozen elephants couldn't budge it now. I guess," she added in a stealthy whisper, "we're goin' to have to slip across Fanton land to get home. I hope it don't poison our feet. Come on, Babe. Quiet now."

Victory lowered a fence rail. As Emma stepped over it a harsh voice boomed out at her. "You just keep to your own side, Emma Hayden!" Ben Fanton ordered, appearing from behind some bushes, gun in hand. "For I'm shootin' mad and might pepper you. I know the devilment you've been up to. First I saw the water and thought you'd turned human. Then it stopped and I knew you hadn't. Now you find yourself in a pickle don't expect help from me."

"Ben. I'm right sorry about that Rock happenin' to slide down," Emma began. But Ben stopped her.

"I know how it happened to slide down! And you'd be sorry till you got across my place! Well, you ain't crossin'. You can set up there on your hill all night and figure out a way to get down. I hope the bears eat you. I'll sleep well if I hear you hollerin' for help."

"Oh! The mean old beast!" Victory gasped out. "I see now why you put up that fence, Aunt Em."

Emma said, rather pleasantly, "He'd be a fool to let me cross after what I done. Now all he wants is us to coax him. But he'll get fooled." She stepped firmly onto her own soil.

Ben called again. "The girl can come across. She ain't never done nothin' so far as I know."

"I can't go! I won't leave you here alone," Vic stated.

Emma gave her a gentle shove. "You go before he changes his mind," she urged.

"Come to the other bank. We'll figure out a way to best him. I'll cross if I have to fly. Step lively now."

Vic obeyed, feeling like a traitor at leaving Emma alone. She hated Ben Fanton furiously as she marched down the slope. When she saw Whit her heart nearly stopped working.

"Oh, Whit!" she cried. "Make him let her cross. She said—" The lie that Emma was sorry would not come out.

"You can't say it can you, Vic?" Whit asked soberly. "Because you know she's done a mean thing. And you helped her. I saw you. After what we had planned I could hardly believe my eyes."

"But I didn't want to, Whit dear," she insisted, unmindful of his father's listening ears. "I wanted you to have the water. You know I did. Aunt Em would never have done what she did if she had taken time to think it over. I know she wouldn't!"

Ben walked away. "Help her over the fence, Son," he directed in kindly tone.

Whit walked beside her, as silent as a stump. Near the fence Victory threw pride to the winds. Her arms stole up around his neck as she lifted her face to his. "Oh, Whit, believe me. Tell me so."

His answer was in his kiss and the way he held her slim body close. "Of course, Honey," he murmured.

Whit kissed her again, and whispered as he boosted her over the fence, "Don't you worry about her—up there, Darling. I'll see she gets home all right after while."

New confidence swept over her as she went home. Nothing could change her love for Whit. But Aunt Em had to love him, too. She recalled Ben Fanton's tone when he had asked Whit to help her. It was kind—and he must have understood they were in love. And it was all right with him.

But she saw clearly that Whit's plan to help Emma would do no good. Getting the better of her was no way to win her over. There had to be another way and she must find it.

Getting Emma home was a simple matter after all.

Remembering a six-foot log on the bluff, Victory took a rope with her when she went up there. She rolled the log to the edge of the ditch and tied one end of the rope to it. The other end she tied a rock and tossed it over to her aunt.

Emma pulled the log across and tossed the rock back. Then she removed her shoes and stockings, tucked up her skirts, and, with her basket beside her, she rode the log which Victory pulled to the home bank. Not a berry was lost, nor was Emma's dignity belittled. Instead, she seemed to enjoy it, and the fact that she had bested Ben Fanton.

"I'm going to change clothes and take these berries right to the store," she proclaimed. "They'll bring a better price right fresh, and I want that goods before it's all gone."

Victory let her go without protest. It would give her the chance to further a plan of her own.

It was almost like sacrilege, going into Emma's room to search for the little blue book she had glimpsed occasionally.

HE FOUND it in a far corner of a bureau drawer, wrapped in fragile tissue paper. Sitting down Victory let her fingers touch the watered silk cover gently. Her thoughts flew to Whit. Had Emma loved someone like she loved Whit? On the fly leaf was a poem, penned in a prim, precise hand.

Roses are red. Violets are blue.
Forever and ever will I love you.
Ben

There it was in all its sad, poignant sweetness. As she had begun to suspect Aunt Em and Ben Fanton had loved. But the promise had been broken. Now they hated. Or did they pretend to? Emma had never married. Ben had found it impossible to live with the girl he had made his wife.

With a catchy sob Vic understood. All their bitterness toward each other was pretense, a barrier. Vic's eager brown eyes searched the dim pages. There were other verses, records of gay parties and dances. Then an entry:

"A young prospector, named Ben Fanton, has built a small house right near us. Pa likes him fine. So do I."

"I am going to a party tonight with Ben Fanton."

The next was longer. "Dear Little Book. I wore my new white lawn dress tonight and Ben said I looked like a newly hatched

angel. He kissed me tonight. Love is so wonderful. It changes everything."

Pages followed, filled with the outpourings of a girlish heart.

"All the girls are crazy about Ben. He is such a tease. But he loves me. We are going to be married, Little Book. My new name will be Mrs. Ben Fanton. Emma Ann Fanton. Mrs. Fanton."

The next date skipped two weeks.

"Oh, Little Book! I want to die! Ben is married. My Ben has married a girl down the valley. We had a trifling quarrel. Oh, how could I say such things when I loved him so! And how could he ever believe them! I don't see how I can go on. But I must. Pa is very sick and needs me."

A few days later, "Pa is bedfast. I am having a drifter help me build a fence. I can't bear to see Ben bring his wife there, where I belong."

"Ben is home, alone. When he came to see Pa I had to tell him he must stay away. He said he would never come again."

An aching knot formed in Victory's throat. Her eyes blurred as she read the next. "Pa died. Ben is home—without his —wife, but farther away than another world. He thinks I hate him and it is just as well since he is a married man."

"Little Book, a blessing has come to me. Roy is going to far Klondike and has left his little girl with me. How I will love her, my own brother's baby."

Carefully Vic closed the book and replaced it.

She hurried to the fence and peeped through expecting to see Whit at once. She did. He was talking to a very pretty blonde girl, laughing, and their arms loosely about each other. A livery rig was in front and Ben stood beside it, talking to a middle-aged woman.

"I couldn't resist driving up to tell you I'm glad you're doing so well, Ben," her high-pitched voice said. "We've got to let old scores die out, for the sake of the children. They do seem made for each other. Come, dear," she called to the girl. "We must get home before dark. Tell Whitfield you'll be back right soon."

Vic's heart became a hard aching core. It was that Aunt Carrie and the girl she was trying to force on Whit. By the way he helped her into the buggy and waved as they drove off it might not be so hard to do.

Whit saw her and came hurrying to her. "Vic. What have you found out?" he asked.

"Plenty. Who is that girl?"

Whit looked astounded. Then he whistled. "Great Maude in the Mornin'! I believe you're jealous!"

"I'm not either," Vic denied stoutly. "Only—you looked at her like you wanted to eat her."

Whit laughed teasingly. "Say. She is a pretty girl."

A single quiver of her lower lip betrayed how near she was to tears. If only he would take her in his arms.

Instead, he asked, "What have you found out, Vic?"

She answered from her misery, "I've found out we'd better wait a while—until we're sure."

His expression hardened. "She's been at you, setting you against me. And you've let her do it!" he accused hotly.

The injustice to Emma stung Vic. He wanted to blame anyone but himself. It wasn't Emma who had carried on with that blonde. She told him so, making her words hard and cutting. "And you're welcome to her. You can marry her for all I care," she finished up.

White lines gathered around his mouth. "Might be a right good idea," he shot back. "If that's what you want I'll see about it."

Vic stepped through the fence and walked away.

Her loved ones passed before her mind in swift review. Whit first—Whit would always be first. And Aunt Em, whose life had been ruined by some foolish quarrel, maybe like this one. Ben Fanton was there, too, because of new sympathy for him. Aunt Em had said cutting things to him, as she had just said to Whit.

NLY Whit wasn't going to rush away in pride and anger and marry some one else. Because she was going back to him and tell him she was sorry. That she trusted him as he had trusted her, against the evidence in his own eyes. That she would love him always.

Peace came to her heart, and a passionate longing to bring her aunt and Ben Fanton together. She thought out her plan.

Emma came home with her bundle. "I've got it, trimmings and buttons and all," she

said cheerfully. Then as she got a good look at Vic she demanded, "What's gone wrong, Babe?"

Victory was done with subterfuges. "Aunt Em. I've fallen in love with Whitfield Fanton. Are you angry about it?"

Emma smiled thinly. "Why did you think I was so anxious for you to have a new dress right now?" she queried. And added, "But you don't seem very happy about it, like a girl should."

"No. We quarreled." She told about the blonde and her bitter jealousy and sharp words. "He'll probably marry her. I'm sure he ought to hate me," she finished dismally, watching Emma's face.

"Likely not," Emma commented. "But, Babe, if he's the right one for you, have the courage to tell him you're sorry. It will take only a minute—and the years ahead may be long—and lonely."

She moved to a window and looked out at the ugly grey fence. Vic followed and said softly, "Aunt Em, will you go with me? Will you help me?"

She waited breathless through an eternally long silence, knowing that perhaps her happiness and also Whit's lay in Emma's decision.

Emma spoke queerly. "It might not be best, Babe. You know how Ben and me get along. We might have a free-for-all. Then you'd feel you had to stand up for me. The boy would side with Ben—"

"Oh, that mean old man! He was going to let you stay on the hill all night!"

"Ben's not mean," Emma said promptly. "I expect he would have let me stay there all night. But he'd a been close to protect me. You see, I didn't use to understand Ben. Now—well, come on, Babe. I'll go over there with you."

Victory had to smile. How quickly Emma had been to defend Ben. But as she led the way to the loose board misgivings beset her. She should have seen Whit alone. He might not—not want to make up with her.

They arrived at the small wooden porch on the Fanton house just as Ben came from the hill carrying a shovel, his legs wet to the knees. Vic saw Emma stiffen and her heart sank into a pit of despair. How could she have expected anything else!

Emma began it. "So you've been traipsin' over my land again, Ben Fanton! Tryin' to steal water I suppose!"

Ben propped his shovel against the house. "I don't need river water," he announced. "It's rainin' in the mountains and the creek will soon be flowin'. And I've been shuttin' off that ditch at the river. If I hadn't after the way you dammed it up you'd a been washed out before mornin'. A woman can do the foolishest danged things," he declared. "If they didn't have a man around to see after them no tellin' what'd happen to 'em."

Victory caught her aunt's sharply indrawn breath. "Ben. Ben. You've been looking after me well all these years," she whispered. "I've known it—believe me I have."

"Well, there wasn't much a body could do, Em," Ben answered. "But I was here—if you had needed anyone."

Emma walked quickly to a bench in the shadows. As Ben joined her and their voices mingled in the gathering dusk, Victory knew the real barrier was down. A sweet sudden joy raced through her. But her heart was clamoring for Whit. She wanted his forgiveness and his kisses.

She found him in the kitchen peeling potatoes for supper. He turned at her light step. One glance and she was in his arms. A million words could not have told her all the wonderful things his kiss contained. As soon as she could talk she washed her heart clean of all the ugly doubts and suspicions.

"And Whit, dear, they're out there making up, Aunt Em and your father," she murmured at last. "They're sitting on a bench together, and they're not quarreling."

She spoke of the Little Book. "It was only a silly quarrel, jealousy and hurt pride. Oh, Whit," she cried with a shudder. "We must never, never quarrel again."

Whit sat her on the corner of the sturdy kitchen table and wrapped his arms around her small body. "We won't, honey," he promised. "And now let's make plans. Dad says the new house is to be ours. I suppose he'll want to fix up your Aunt Emma's place and that they'll live there. We'll tear down that fence—"

"Oh, Whitfield Fanton!" Victory exclaimed joyously, as she smothered him with her kisses. "I do love you . . . . I always will."

(Continued from page 31)

You ain't changed and you never will. You'd make Lea's life hell on earth. Besides," he added bluntly. "Lea never really wanted you. It was me eggin' him on. It's Del he wants. Not you."

Del knew that Pa was trying to do what was best for both his girls. But Pa couldn't control love. If there was the least hankering in Lea's heart for Lianne she had to know it. Now—before Pa could take Lianne away.

Her sister was defiant. "Lea's crazy about me. You know it, Pa. I'll crook my finger and he'll marry me instead of Del. Like you said I'm of age. You can't stop us."

Del fled. "Lea," she breathed, as she saddled Maggie, topped her and drummed her heels against the tubby sides. "Lea, darling, love me best."

Lea had just finished his supper when she burst in on him. "Del, darlin'," he exclaimed. "What's happened?"

"Come with me, Lea," she said, avoiding his arms, though she ached for their comfort. "It's Pa and Lianne. She's home and they're quarreling. You've got to come!"

It was a nightmare, that ride through the darkness. Lea held his powerful bay in to Maggie's shuffling gait. Few words were spoken. Del wondered what his thoughts were at the prospect of again seeing Lianne. Did his pulses leap? Was he glad?

She stood in the corner shadows of the room, feeling almost nothing, waiting.

Lianne crossed to Lea, hips swinging. "Lea, darling," she said, slipping a hand through his arm and leaning against him. "I'm so ashamed for not knowing my own heart. I know what you were going to ask me last Sunday. Ask me now and I'll promise—"

Lea led her to a chair. "Why, Lianne, a promise between us would be a mistake on both sides. You're wise enough to see that."

She lifted a white, strained face to him. "But I thought you loved me, Lea? Didn't you?"

"Liked you, Lianne," Lea corrected. "And I'm going to keep on liking you. Because you'll soon be my sister. Del and me, we're gettin' married. You'll be glad we're so happy I know. Del's little, but somehow she fits right into the corners of my heart. You'll find someone like that someday, too. A body can get sort of sidetracked, imaginin' things. But when they see the right one they know it. We never even thought about love between us, Lianne. Isn't that so?" he asked kindly.

Del's overwhelming emotion was pride. Pride in Lea, that he could deal with Lianne, give her the truth without humiliating her. She saw tears in the blue eyes. Saw the yellow head drop upon her folded arms. Del sped to her sister with loving comfort.

"Lianne, honey, let's go to our room and unpack your things," she suggested eagerly, with a meaning glance at Pa. "Oh, Sister, it's so good to have you home again."

Strangely subdued, Lianne went with her. At the door she stopped to face Lea, her hair tousled, her face streaked with powder and tears.

"Lea Stratton. You're mighty lucky to get Del," she said steadily, and almost smiled. "I'll be right glad to have you for a brother. And, Pa," she said more gently, making her surrender complete. "I'll be packed and ready in the morning, if you want me to go to Aunt Belle's."

"You goose!" Del exclaimed in their room. "Pa can't let you go. He needs you. You've got to stay here with him and Aunt Electra. I'll be leaving soon you know."

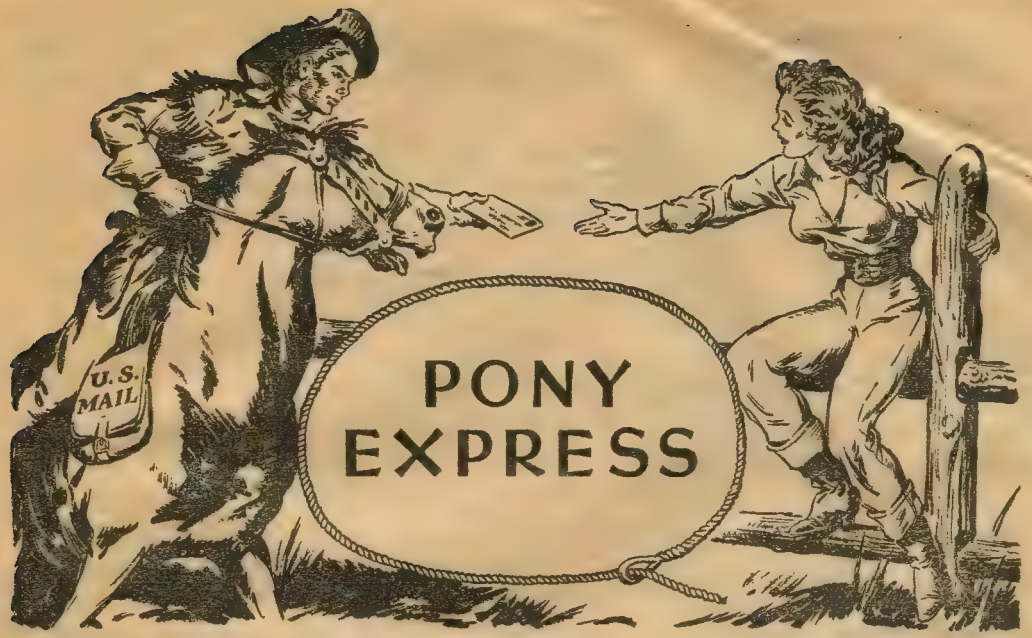
Lianne seized the small, faithful hands. "Del! Little Sister. I do want you to be happy. I want you to have my carpet and all my linens. Every one of them. I want you to be happy."

"Hush, honey. You'll be wanting them yourself some day," Del whispered. But at Lianne's insistence she agreed to accept the carpet, since she needed it at once. They would set up another for Lianne. "But not the linens. I have some. And Aunt Electra says she is giving me all of hers."

Afterwards Del walked with Lea. She stood in the circle of his arms and renewed her pledge to love him—always. Her heart was washed clean of all doubts. And Pa would sleep well this night.

"Lea, Lea," she whispered. "I'm so happy! I'm so happy it hurts."

He kissed the warm lips again. "And it's my job to see you stay that way, darlin'," he answered softly.



Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Lonely Blue Eyes

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl of seventeen with dark hair and blue-gray eyes. I am five feet, six inches tall, and weigh 122 pounds. I like to cook—especially fish and banana pudding. I also like to plant flowers—and to go to the movies. Boys and girls all ages are welcome. I promise to answer all letters.

MISS HAZEL WILSON
2344 NW 95 Terrace
Rt. 3, Box 1022K
Miami, Florida

War-Plant Girls

Dear Editor:

We are readers of RANGELAND ROMANCES, and would be very thankful if you would enter our names in the Pony Express. We both work in a war plant.

Helen is a Hungarian of 17, with black hair, brown eyes, is 5 ft. 2 in. tall, and weighs 114 lbs.

Gladys is a Canadian, 17, with red hair, blue eyes, weighing 125 lbs. and is 5 ft. 4 in. tall.

We enjoy dancing, roller-skating, and almost every sport.

HELEN MONAR and GLADY CLARK
140 Fennel Avenue
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Especially Stout . . .

Dear Editor:

I am a steady reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES. Will you be so kind as to print this letter in the Pony Express? I am a young man of 28 years of age, with dark-brown hair and of medium build. I've just come to Toronto from British Columbia. I'm indeed very lonely.

I'm easy to get along with, as I like company very much. I enjoy reading, writing letters, singing and playing old-time music on the violin. I would like to hear from girls any age, looks or weight—especially stout—who would care to have a sincere friend.

So here's hoping the mailman visits me often with plenty of letters from far and wide.

FRANK J. RAY
102 Maitland Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Boogie-Woogie

Dear Editor:

I must admit I haven't been a constant reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES up until now. And I enjoy it very much. You can count on me as a regular reader from now on.

As I love to write and receive letters, first of all, I would appreciate it very much if you would print my plea for pen pals.

I am a Minnesota gal, 16 years of age, have hazel eyes, medium-brown hair, weigh 105 lbs., and I'm 5 ft. 3 in. tall. My favorite hobby is writing letters and raiding the mailbox. As a pastime, I fill scrapbooks.

I love dancing, horseback riding, bowling, swimming and anything else you can name. I am a musician, in a way, that is I play the piano—and go in for boogie-woogie and cowboy songs in a big way.

So won't all you gals, boys, servicemen and women, from 16 to 100 years of age, write to a Minnesota gal. I promise all letters I receive will be answered promptly.

VIVIAN NELSON
Route #2—Box 267A
Hopkins, Minnesota

♥ ♥ VIXEN OF MYSTERY MESA

By Robert Turner

Lovely Angie had to reveal the guarded secret of Mystery Mesa—or abandon a wounded cowboy who had fought for her.

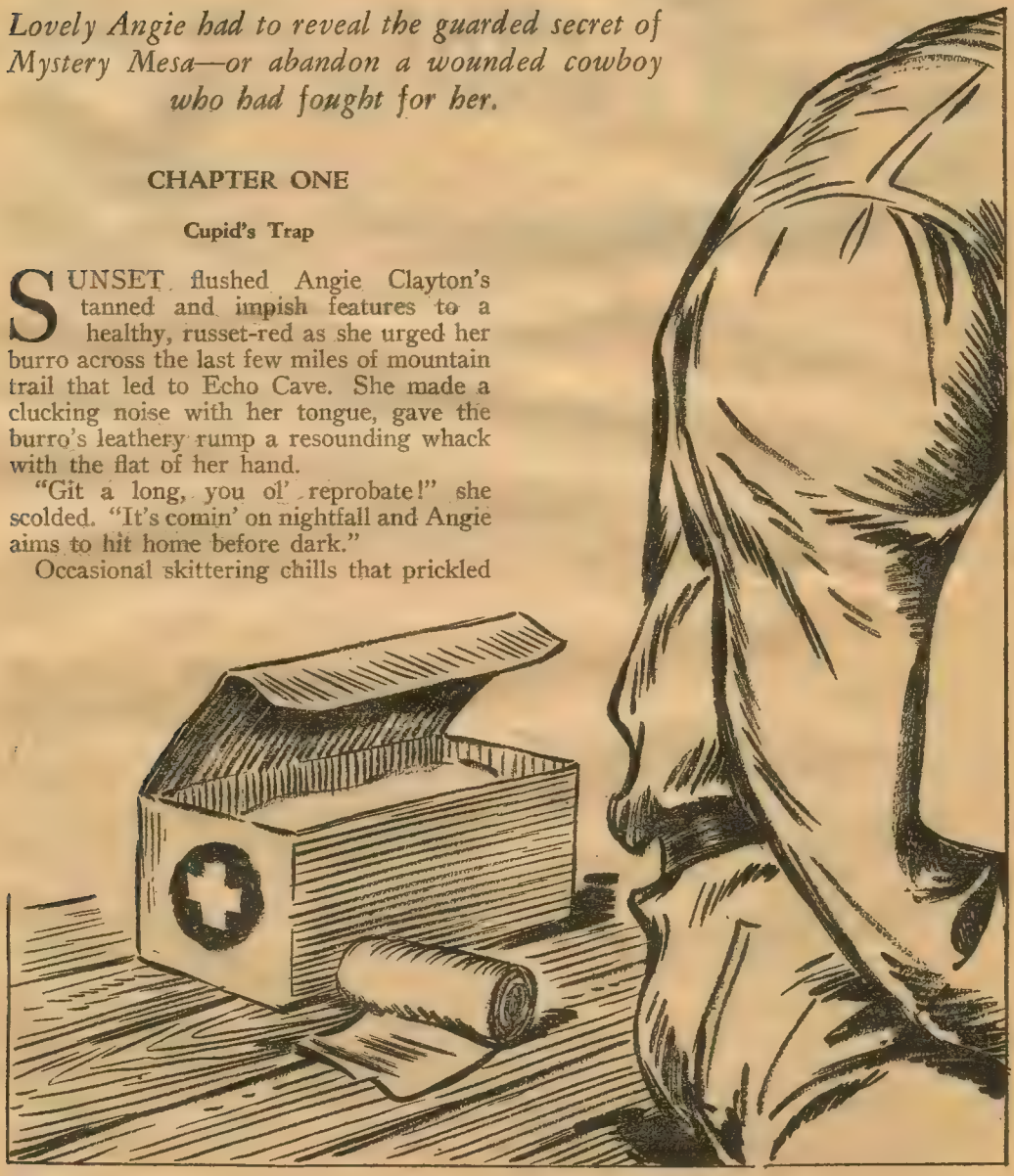
CHAPTER ONE

Cupid's Trap

SUNSET flushed Angie Clayton's tanned and impish features to a healthy, russet-red as she urged her burro across the last few miles of mountain trail that led to Echo Cave. She made a clucking noise with her tongue, gave the burro's leathery rump a resounding whack with the flat of her hand.

"Git a long, you ol' reprobate!" she scolded. "It's comin' on nightfall and Angie aims to hit home before dark."

Occasional skittering chills that prickled



"I'm going to take you away from here, Angie."

up and down Angie's spine weren't altogether from the sudden coolness of oncoming evening. She was used to the mountain's quick change of temperature at day's end. She was also used to being alone in the wilderness and never before had the darkness of night held fear for her.

She was being a silly little nincompoop, she knew. There was nothing to be afraid of, really. She was just nervous and upset after today's visit to Mesquite Flats. It was the first trip she'd made since Paw had died—the first she'd ever made, alone. It had been worse, even, than the other trips with Paw.

Before, people had been careful not to stare too long at the wild looking, strangely beautiful young girl, had been careful how they spoke. Folks in Mesquite Flats had learned to respect the lashing tongue, fast fists and faster guns of old Jeb Clayton, the hermit of Mystery Mesa.

But today they had gathered in little groups as Angie, alone, in her tattered work shirt and levis, proudly rode the ugly, scarred old burro down Main Street. From the corner of her eye, Angie saw them whispering behind cupped hands. She knew that they were wondering what had happened to Paw. They didn't know he had been buried up on the Mesa he'd loved, under a patch of green grass, trimmed with fresh-daily wild flowers, nearly three months, now.

Then there had been those two saddle-tramps in the dry-goods store. The way they had eyed her! The way they had laughed when Angie took a fancy to several yards of white tulle wedding veil, and old Mrs. Egbert who ran the store, had told her that *she* wouldn't want *that*—then explained what it was.

Angie had listened, only understanding intuitively what all this talk of wedding and marriage was about. Angie had never known any other girls, nor any man but Paw, all her life.

But because those horrible men had laughed so, because of the ill-concealed amusement in the voice and expression of Mrs. Egbert—because the long, full, frothy length of white veil was so soft and filmy to the touch and was so pure *beautiful*—Angie had purchased it along with swatches of homespun for everyday wear.

Her deep lips curled now, as she thought of the veil, wrapped up with other purchases that filled the saddle-bags draped across the burro's neck.

It would be such fun to examine the foamy-light material, trying it on before the long, cracked mirror in the cabin, in the different ways old Mrs. Egbert said it could be worn.

THE next instant the burro suddenly rounded a sharp curve in the trail and Angie's heart came bumping up against her teeth. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart and pulses thrummed like mad drums.

Two men stood beside their horses, the two saddle tramps from the dry goods store, in the middle of the trail, in a last, lonely patch of sun-glow. The tall, stooped one in the black, flat-crowned stetson, was lighting a quirly. In the yellow match flare, his thin, beard-stained features were saturnine. His deeply sunken eyes gleamed across the flame at Angie.

The second man stood spraddle-legged, his short, rotund body teetering on spindly legs. A Mexican sombrero was pushed back on his head. Under a poorly rattail mustache full lips curved in a smirk. His eyes were lost in pouches of fat. He nonchalantly spun a .44 on a stubby forefinger.

Angie tried to spill out words, but none came. A moment of throbbing panic sickened her and she started to heel the ribs of the burro, tried to whirl him around.

"I wouldn't get any foolish ideas, senorita!" the fat one said in a soft, oily voice, with a barely perceptible accent. The .44 suddenly stopped twirling, was tight in his fist, the lean muzzle drawing a bead on Angie's flat stomach. "You are so alive—so preety, senorita—even in those rags," he said. "It would be the peety to shoot—"

"Suppose you hist yoreself down off that walking buzzard-meat. Pandro an' I wanta palaver with you," the tall one advised. He followed Pandro, lazily, toward the burro.

Color returned slowly to Angie's pert, lovely features. Her firm chin jutted. She thrust a hand inside her ragged blouse, pulled out a tiny, draw-string pouch and with a graceful defiant gesture, tossed it at the foot of the fat man.

"There's what you're after. There's what's left of the gold dust I brought to town," she said, haughtily. "Take it, you

thievin' scoundrels and get out of my way. I'm ridin' on."

Pandro glanced down at the leather pouch, then up at the slim and lovely girl astride the aged old burro, sitting as erect and regal as a queen on a slave-drawn litter, in spite of her rough and ragged clothing.

Pandro turned to the tall man. "Rafe," he said, "she ees so fonny, thees one. There she sits, the lonely leetle waif. She ees so full of fire. So—is it you say—defiant?"

Grinning, Rafe stepped in front of Pandro, kicked the pouch into nearby bushes. "We ain't after no chicken feed, ma'am," he told Angie. "We saw the gold dust you brought into town when you paid for purchases at the store. We've heard tell of the high grade ore yore old man always brought in to pay for supplies. Pandro and I figger there must be real rich diggin's up there on Mystery Mesa, where you live."

"*Ai,*" Pandro said, "and since the ol' one didn't come to town today, Rafe and I, we decide perhaps he ees seeck—or perhaps dead. Maybe the senorita need a couple of good pardners to help her work that gold claim, eh?"

Angie said, fiercely: "You two hombres are fishin' up the wrong crick! Mystery Mesa is private, understand! Ain't nobody but Paw and I ever been up there. Ain't nobody else *goin'* up there, ever."

RAFE dragged deeply on his quirly, dropped it. With smoke streaming from his nostrils, he said, softly: "Nobody ever trailed you before Angie Clayton, to find the secret entrance to Mystery Mesa because they were afraid o' your paw and his guns. But he ain't along, now. You're takin' us to that secret entrance and me an Pandro are gonna work your gold diggin's for you!"

The two men were up close to the burro now. Suddenly Angie kicked out her foot against Rafe's long throat, pushed with all the power in her sturdy young thigh. The lanky gunman cursed, staggered backward, tripped over a boulder and sat down hard.

Angie tried to whirl the burro around. But moving with amazing speed for his bulk, Pandro leaped forward, reached up and grabbed Angie's arm, yanked her bodily from the burro's back. She came down, fighting and kicking for all she was worth, a tiny, firm-muscled bundle of spitting fury.

For one long moment the squat little bandit held her tightly in his embrace, arms pinned to her sides, in spite of her frantic squirming. His round dark face, the eyes like burning fire-coals, came toward hers. She felt his breath hot on her cheeks.

But just before Pandro's lips touched hers, Angie suddenly darted her head forward and tiny, strong white teeth fastened onto the fleshiness of the bandit's nose.

With a shrill, outraged cry, Pandro stepped back, one hand cupped over the injured proboscis. He howled with anguish, swore in rapid-fire Spanish.

Angie's lips peeled back and her green eyes blazed. Her fists clenched tightly against her thighs. "That'll larn you, you—you greasy varmint!" she shouted, angrily. "You—"

Suddenly she stopped. Over the sound of her own voice and the subsiding yowls of pain from Pandro, came another sound. It was deep, rich laughter, coming from a man just entering the clearing. He was leading a trail-thinned pinto with one hand. The other hovered around the bone-butted sixgun holstered against his leg, even as he doubled with mirth.

"I was just fixin' to stick in my two cents," he managed, still chuckling. "But apparently, it ain't necessary. Seems the young lady takes care of herself, purty well!"

Pandro, still clutching his nose, glared, angrily. Rafe wheeled, sliding into a half-crouch, reaching for the low-slung guns at

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his hips. His narrow eyes darted quickly over the newcomer, seeing the rawboned ranginess of his figure, noting the Texas rig of his saddle.

Rafe demanded gruffly: "What in hell's name's the idea sneakin' up on us, thataway, stranger?"

The laughter drained out of the newcomer. He straightened and his gray-blue eyes slitted. His broad mouth firmed at the corners.

"I don't know's I like your tone, Slim," he said, with a flat, soft drawl. "Don't like the way you and yore pard was treatin' the lady, either. . . . As for me sneakin', so happens I was just driftin' through, searchin' for strays and heard yore voices and come to investigate. For yore information, my name's Duane Drummond."

All the time he was speaking, Angie Clayton was studying the tall, handsome Texan, remembering the clear, deep sound of his laughter. She had never heard anyone laugh quite like that before. She couldn't seem to pull her eyes away from him. None of the hostility she usually felt upon meeting a stranger was in her now.

The next instant Duane Drummond's eyes swung toward Angie and their gazes met and held. Angie dropped her eyes, with a queer little intake of breath between her teeth. She heard him say:

"If you were headin' anyplace, ma'am, and this pair was aimin' to stop you, just roll on. Don't reckon they'll bother you no more."

"Hold it!" Rafe snarled. "You cain't bust right in here and—"

Duane Drummond cut him off, turning to Pandro, and saying with a chuckle: "Or maybe your pard, here, would like another set o' the lady's teeth marks on his ugly face."

CHAPTER TWO

Paradise Mesa

THAT was too much for Pandro. He screamed: "You theenk eet fonny! You laugh at Pandro, eh?" The squat little Mex raised the .44 and squeezed trigger. "Pandro weel show you what ees fonny! Pandro teach you to meddle in—"

He never finished the sentence. A flash second before the Mex triggered, Duane Drummond had hurled himself sideways, dragged out his own gun and fired. His bullet caught Pandro in the gun-wrist and his weapon flew sideways, discharging as it did so. Pandro spun around, screaming, clutching his wounded wrist.

Watching, terrified, with one fist stuffed into her mouth, Angie stood almost paralyzed. But suddenly, a movement to her right caught her eyes. She yanked her hand away from her mouth, yelled: "Look out, Duane!"

The warning came just in time. Rafe had whipped out his sixgun at the first intimation of trouble, snapped a shot at Duane. But Angie's yell saved the Texan. He lurched to one side, ducked and then sprawled forward on his face. But the next second his gun cracked once more and this time, it was Rafe's gun that went flying from his fingers.

Meanwhile Pandro, moaning and cursing, had streaked for his horse. He had had enough. Just as the Mexican's pony thundered off down the trail back in the direction of town, Rafe reached his own mount in a series of loping leaps, forked saddle and galloped away.

Angie Clayton, rigid and trembling, turned toward Duane, saw, with a little startled cry, that he was still lying prone on the ground, head on his arms.

"He—he's hurt bad!" she cried and darted over to the fallen man, kneeled by his side. Gently, she turned his head up, lifted it to her soft lap. She winced with sympathy seeing the ugly flesh wound across his temple, where Rafe's bullet had grazed him. Swiftly, she yanked out the tail of her shirt, ripped off strips of the thin cloth, cleaned away the blood as best she could and wrapped a bandage round his head.

When she was finished, Angie looked down onto the long, sprawled length of him. She suddenly realized that while she was staring at him, her fingers were running through the slightly waving crispness of his blond hair.

She pulled her hand away, looked around a little guiltily. Then, realizing that she was perfectly alone, out here on the mountain trail, curiosity and the strange magne-

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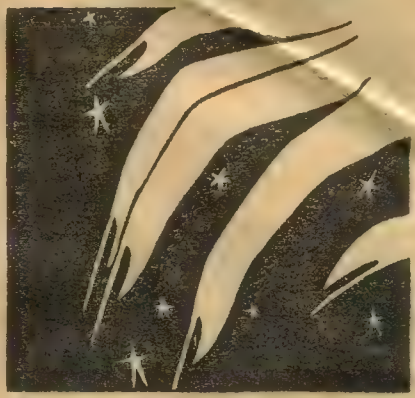

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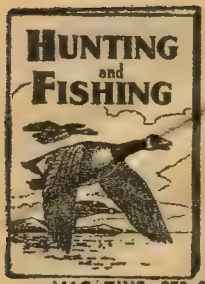

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tism this man seemed to have for her, asserted itself again.

Slowly, she let her gaze travel over his handsome face. His lips were full and curved, but there was strength in them and his chin was square and rugged.

"He—he got hurt like this, trying to help me," she mused, half aloud. "And he—well, he's nice to look at. It makes me feel all funny just to look at him. I didn't—know there were men like this in the world."

For a brief moment she touched the tips of her cool fingers to the slight, shaven roughness of his cheek. Then, with a little sigh, she began chafing his wrists and soon his long blond lashes flickered. He stared vacantly up at her. His mouth curved slightly at the corners.

"Angel!" he breathed. "You—you're an angel with reddish hair and green eyes. I didn't know they came like that!"

Angie felt warm waves of color flow up from the neck of her shirt and a pleasant tingling sensation ran all through her. She turned her eyes away, embarrassed. "Can you stand? I'll help you up."

"I can try," he said.

He sat up and Angie put one arm around his back and helped him to his feet. He swayed dizzily.

"Sorry," he said, tightly, through compressed lips. "I—I'll be all right in just a minute."

Angie clung tightly to him. "What am I goin' to do with you?" she said. "You've got to have that wound tended to properly. You can't ride far in the condition you're in."

"I'll be all right," he insisted feebly.

They stood there for a moment and mixed with her bewilderment at this situation and her concern for Duane, Angie found herself conscious of a warmth stealing through her just standing so close to this tall, handsome Texan, with her arm around his broad shoulders.

She knew that the nearest ranch was a good five miles away, and part of the journey hard riding. Duane could never make it. And it was equally as far back to town.

"There's only one thing to do," she said, suddenly, her voice trembling a little. "I promised Paw nobody but me would ever get there, but I've *got* to take you. Maybe Paw will understand."

IN THE gloom of night that was fast settling around them, Duane's gray-blue eyes gleamed close to hers, as he turned his head. Suddenly she saw the flash of his teeth in a smile.

"Now I know who you are," he said. "I've only been around these parts a short while. I hail from down around the border. But I've already heard about you, Angie Clayton—you and your father."

"My father's dead," she said.

"I'm sorry," he told her softly, "truly sorry, Angie. Look, you just help he up onto the pinto and I'll make it back to the ranch, all right.

It was a slow job getting him into the saddle.

Suddenly he slumped in the saddle, unconscious. He would have fallen if Angie hadn't been there to hold him on the horse. Desperately, now, Angie ripped several strips of cloth from the tail of her shirt, used the pieces to lash Duane's wrists to the saddle horn, to hold him in place. Then she slowly swung up onto the pinto's back behind him, held her arms around his waist. She ordered the burro to head for home. The burro doggedly led the way.

As she rode along, Angie's thought drifted back over her own life. . . .

Angie's mother had taken her five year old brother and run away with a neighboring rancher when Angie was just a baby. Paw had never seen her again. He had become a broken and embittered man, nurturing a burning hate for all of society. With Angie in his arms, old Jeb Clayton had left his ranch and gone to live in Mystery Mesa for the rest of his life, in solitude and bitterness.

The old man had taught Angie to read and write and to appreciate the natural splendor of their hideaway. He had taught her that the world was a cold, cruel place filled with nothing but heartache and misery brought about by man's inhumanity to man.

"Life, here, alone, away from all that hate and greed and treachery," he had told Angie, "is simple and good. You'll have all you'll ever need up here, young'n."

Angie's reminiscing was brought to an end as the rough trail suddenly turned into the great yawning black aperture that was Echo Cave. Here, Angie picked up a large,

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pine-knot torch that she had previously hidden. This, she lighted and they moved slowly on.

In the flickering red glow from the torch, long shadows raced eerily along the rocky walls. Water dripped continually from stalagmites and the clopping of the animals' hooves over stone echoed back and forth for miles into the dark recesses of the cave. Every once in a while bats fluttered through the pale glow of light.

The burro paced sure-footedly down a long, narrow tunnel that branched off from the main part of the cave. To anyone who didn't know, it would have seemed ridiculous to think that this tunnel would eventually lead out onto Mystery Mesa, located halfway up the mountain, a thousand feet above and in a completely opposite direction.

But several hundred yards along, the tunnel took a hairpin curve in the direction of the Mesa and started a gradual incline upward.

As they moved nearer to her secret home in the mountain fastness, Angie's mind became confused with strange and conflicting thoughts. Several times, she had an urge to turn back. She realized now, that she was being very reckless, taking this stranger up to the Mesa. She knew nothing at all about him.

She thought, too, of the length of wedding veil she had purchased in the dry-goods store. She wouldn't be able to wear that, with him around, to try it on in front of the mirror.

In a few minutes more, Angie suddenly turned the burro toward the left wall of the cave-tunnel where there stood a huge, pear shaped boulder. To one side of it, was a narrow space, just about large enough for a horse and rider to pass through. The burro, with the pinto following, moved through here, toward a hidden long, steep incline, with a series of natural stone steps leading into the blackness.

Finally, the steep ascent of this tunnel leveled off and once again they were out in the clear, crisp night air.

The exit from the cave came out into a dense copse of trees, hemmed in by high shrubbery, making it completely invisible from the high cliffs that backed up the Mesa.

A three-quarter moon was out, now, hanging high and sharp and clear above the mountains. The whole Mesa was bathed in its pale white light. Suddenly Duane came to, looked around him.

Here was a natural tableland, a quarter mile square. Backing it were sheer, unclimbable cliffs rising straight up for nearly a thousand feet. Fronting it, was another cliff, a straight downward drop of nearly a quarter mile. From the Mesa, Duane could look out over miles of moon-drenched rangeland. Far in the distance he saw the faint twinkle of lights from his own ranch. Southward was the faint glow of illumination from Mesquite Flats.

A hundred yards away from them was a crude log cabin, with a small barn and a corral on one side and a good sized garden, green with crops on the other. There was also several acres of green grass grazing land.

Duane marveled: "It's like a garden of Eden, hidden away up here on the side of the mountain. It's the most beautiful spot I've ever seen, Angie."

"We'd better get on to the house," she said. "I've got to take care of your wound. Is it bothering you much?"

"Well," he said, with a forced chuckle. "I feel a little wobbly, but much better."

He was so much better now, that Angie didn't have to help him much across the clearing to the cabin.

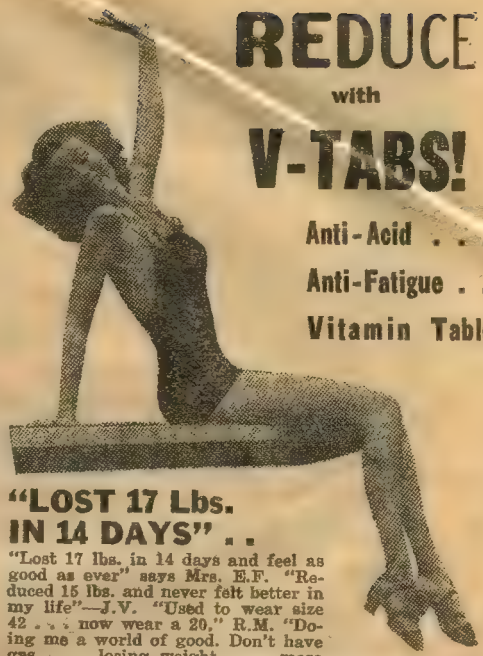
Inside the little log cabin, Angie lighted an oil lamp on the table.

CHAPTER THREE

Heart Thief

AS SHE stood there with the warm glow of the lamp flowing over her, she was aware of Duane's glance playing over her slim, lithe figure. All of a sudden she was very self-conscious of the wildness of her hair, of gaping holes in the tattered man's clothing she wore and the patches of creamy white arm and shoulder that showed through. Her small hands moved quickly to her hair, gave it a few ineffectual pats. She folded her arms, tried to cover the holes in her sleeves.

"Don't be embarrassed," Duane said.



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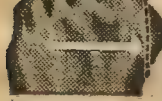

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Looking at him, Angie saw that some of the color had returned to his face. He was smiling and all of his features held a soft and tender look.

"You're beautiful, just as you are," he told her. "I've seen girls in town, dressed up in fuss and finery and none of them could hold a candle to you just the way you are now. You're—why, you're like some lovely precious stone, way up here in the wilds of the mountain."

Angie's eyes suddenly got bright and green as sun-splashed sea-foam. She whirled away toward the door. "I'd better go out and unload the burro," she said. There was a strange huskiness in her voice.

Just before she stepped out the door, she heard Duane shout:

"Wait a minute. I'll come help you. I feel better now. No need for you to tote a lot of heavy stuff."

Going across the moonlit yard, Angie glanced sideways at Duane's rugged profile, thinking how strong and hard he had been with the bandits—yet how gentle and courtly he was being now, coming out to help her carry bundles.

Several times while they were taking bundles out of the saddle-bags, their hands touched. And once, for a breathless moment, Duane closed his large hand over hers, squeezed it tenderly and Angie's heart seemed to stand still.

As they went back inside the house, Duane stumbled slightly over the door sill. Some of the bundles which he was carrying spilled to the floor and one of them burst open. Instantly, Angie set the few packages she was carrying, down on a chair. "Oh, you've dropped the veil!" she cried.

Just as she stooped to pick up the package, Duane hunkered down, too. Before she could stop him, his hands picked up the length of wedding veil, half tumbled out of the package.

"What's this?" he said. "Why, it's beautiful!"

Angie felt color stealing into her cheeks. For a moment she couldn't find words. She knew she was being silly. There was no reason to be embarrassed just because this man was seeing a bolt of material she had bought in town. Yet, she knew, too, that the wedding veil was more than that, really. It was something very personal to Angie,

somehow associated with her most intimate thoughts.

They both straightened up together. Duane held the veil spread out between his big, tanned hands and the filmy white cloth looked so fragile and dainty by contrast.

"Why did you buy this?" he asked softly.

"I—why—" she stammered. "I don't really know. It was just so—so nice and I wanted it so much."

Suddenly she reached for the veil. "Please let me have it!" she said, almost sharply, to cover up her embarrassment.

Just as she reached, he whipped the material around behind his back. Unconsciously, Angie reached both hands around him, in her determined effort to grab back the veil. And when Duane didn't move, she found herself standing very close to him, her arms reaching around him, almost as though she was hugging him.

Before she could pull away, he bent his head and his lips brushed lightly against hers for a tingling instant. And then, her hands, reaching behind him, found the veil and snatched it from his fingers. With her breath coming in gasps, she whirled away toward a closet, put the veil up out of sight on a shelf.

Then she and Duane busied themselves with unpacking the supplies and things she'd brought from town in the other packages. For several minutes neither of them spoke, both held tightly in the spell of that brief, completely unexpected caress.

After a few minutes, Angie managed to say: "You'd better sit down while I go fetch some water and something to bandage that wound on your head."

SHE went out through the kitchen into the back yard and filled a pan with clean, cold well water. Out there, she looked up at the stars and the soft drawl of Duane Drummond's voice and the music of his laughter was like a song in her ears. She remembered the warm brush of his lips and the way she had felt the moment afterward.

She remembered what Mrs. Egbert, the dry-goods store proprietor, had told her this afternoon: "So a girl and a boy get to feeling all crazy and silly about each other, fall in love, and then they get married."

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"Love?" Angie had repeated.

Mrs. Egbert's bushy gray brows had lifted. "Sure, child—love. When a feller and a girl get their hearts all tied up in knots over each other, when they just look at each other and feel all weak inside. . . . Land's sakes, child, you know what love is, don't you?"

Angie hadn't known—then. But she thought she knew now. She seemed to suddenly have all the symptoms the old woman had mentioned. And then her gaze came down from the star-swept heavens and as she turned back toward the house, her eyes passed the moonlit little plot, a short distance away, where Paw was buried.

"Stuff and nonsense!" she told herself. "Yore not in love with anybody 'tall, Angie Clayton. You know better'n that. Paw taught you better. You get back in the house and get that tall Texan better quick as you can and get him out of here. You and Paw don't want no strangers around Mystery Mesa!"

Back in the kitchen she cut up some strips of old white sheet into neat bandages and took them, with the pan of water back into the big front room, so neat and clean with its well kept hand-hewn furniture.

First Angie bathed and dressed the wound on Duane's temple. All the time she worked, he kept looking up at her, but Angie kept her eyes averted. She didn't want that warm, gray-blue glance upon her own. And every time he opened his mouth to say something, she hushed him up. She couldn't stand to have him sweet-talking her.

Several times while she was thus occupied, she felt Duane's hand reach up and lightly stroke her thick, chestnut-colored hair. But she pretended not to notice, even though the effect of that gentle caress seemed to run all through her.

"You're hair is beautiful," he'd tell her. "It's caught years of mountain sunshine and held it."

But Angie didn't answer. She couldn't. She didn't know what to say. She knew she shouldn't say such things to her, that he had no right. She knew she should stop him, that this was treading on dangerous ground. But she knew, too, that she'd die, if he didn't go on saying them. She didn't want him to ever stop.

Just as she was about through with the bandaging, she heard him say:

"Angie, I know you won't believe this. You'll think I'm talkin' through my hat. I never would have believed it myself if anybody'd told me it was going to happen. But the first moment I saw you, when you'd tangled with those two tough hombres down on the mountain trail, and you were standing there all full of fire and anger, like some lovely little savage, I fell in love with you. Do you understand that, Angie, honey? I love you."

He broke off, his voice trembling. Angie stood there, finished now, with the bandaging. Slowly, their eyes met and it was to Angie suddenly as though the sun was blinding her and she couldn't see. She could hear, though, hear that vibrant, Texan drawl going on:

"And I'm going to take you away from here, Angie. I'm going to marry you, because I know you feel the same way I do. I can see it in your eyes. You're going to leave this place to your Paw, who really loved it. It's no place for a beautiful young girl to perish and wilt away like a lonely flower. We can come back here, summers and stay—"

ABRUPTLY he stopped talking. She felt his hand tangle in the reddish brown wildness of her hair. Her head went back. She saw his tanned, handsome face coming toward hers through the blur.

"No, Duane!" she murmured.

And then his mouth was against hers, stopping up her words. Fire seemed to burn across her mouth. She struggled half heartedly. And then she wilted and her hands went up and around his strong neck, pulled his head even closer.

A moment later when they broke breathlessly apart, Angie heard Duane saying: "You will marry me, Angie, darling, won't you? You *do* love me?"

With her eyes still closed and her senses swimming, all that he was saying, all that he meant, tried to settle in her thoughts. As though from far away, she seemed to hear her own voice saying:

"Yes, Duane."

Almost before the words were out, though, she pulled away, and with one lithe,

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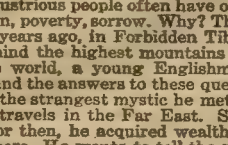

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graceful movement, twisted and rose to her feet. Some inner instinct warned her that she had better do this.

She raced across the room, flung open a door and entered her own room. She hurled herself full length upon the patch quit atop her bed and lay there trembling like a tired and frightened animal.

How long she lay there, Angie never knew. Her thoughts whirled and the blood seemed to go singing through her veins like a wild brook through the mountains. She kept feeling again, Duane's firm mouth on hers, kept hearing over and over his proposal. She was just beginning to realize the glorious wonder of it all, when she fell into exhausted sleep. . . .

Blazing sunlight streaming in through the the window awakened her the next morning. Stretching lazily, with the strong, limber grace of a cat, Angie rolled over and sat up. Outside birds were chirping.

Memory of events of the night before came washing back into her mind and slowly her green eyes grew warm and bright and a soft deep smile curled on her lips. Remembering, she knew what that strangely glorious sensation that seemed to fill her through and through, was. She knew why this morning was brighter, happier than any she had ever known. She was in love. And Duane Drummond loved *her*. He was going to marry her and she was going out to live in the world like other women. She knew, now, that that was something she had long wanted, even though she had not fully recognized the fact.

Slowly, she pulled open the door of her room, peeked out. But Duane was no longer in the chair and she realized that he must have awakened early and gone out doors. She felt a little twinge of conscience that she had left him sitting up all night. But it had been a comfortable chair. And the fact that he was up and around proved that his wound was better.

She darted out through the kitchen to the well and filled a pan with icy water, came back to her room and bathed. Swiftly, her fingers mended the rents in her shirt and levis while she thought how she would spend the day, after breakfast, making a new dress from the materials she had bought in town, yesterday.

Then she remembered the veil. She ran

toward the closet, thinking: "Now I can *really* wear it—for what it was meant to be worn. I'm going to be a bride. Duane said so! He said he was going to marry me!"

Swiftly her hands fumbled into the darkness of the closet, eager to bring the beautiful white tulle out into the light where she could see it again, feel its soft filminess between her fingers again.

Slowly a frown came over Angie's lovely features. More feverishly her hands began to search along the crowded shelf of the closet. And when she failed to find the veil, she ran and got a match and in its light pulled things helter-skelter from the closet. But the veil was not there. It was gone.

"Duane!" she said through her teeth. "He's gone. He must have taken the veil for some reason!" She raced toward the door.

FIRST she went to the barn and he wasn't there. Then she walked around the garden and across the pasture and when she still didn't find him, she stopped and yelled his name at the top of her lungs. There was no answer. Only the sound of her own voice came echoing back from the edge of the cliffs. And then she saw the footsteps leading across the yard to the gold diggings.

Leadenly her feet carried her in that direction. She stopped by the diggings, looked down at newly dug chunks of yellow-streaked rock. Duane had been here. He had been examining the diggings, getting samples.

Suddenly she whirled back to the barn

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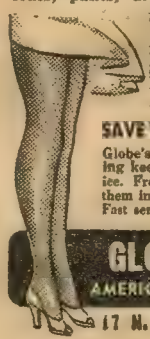

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where she had tethered the burro and Duane's pinto the night before, her heart sinking like a stone in a pond. She knew, even before she reached the spot and saw that the pinto was gone. She knew that Duane had left the Mesa.

Swaying, dizzily, she turned and headed back toward the house. She knew now that she had been just a dumb little bunny, listening to the Texan's slick words of love. He had not meant a word of it. He was merely hoorawing her all the time. She had just been a pitiful, amusing little hermit's daughter for him to lie to and josh along.

"And for the crowning insult," she told herself, furiously, "he's taken my veil—stolen it—to give to some hussy in town!"

This morning Duane must have awakened early and walked around the Mesa. He'd seen the fine quality of the ore in the diggings. He had realized that there was a possible fortune there and he had left, after finding the hidden exit in the grove of trees. He would come back, soon, with a couple of cronies, to steal her gold.

She got Paw's rifle down from the wall in the front room. She went outside and walked across the yard and sat down with her back propped against a tree, facing the grove and waited for the man who had betrayed her heart and her trust.

It was a long wait, nearly two hours. But finally the sound of horses' hoofs brought Angie to her feet.

Duane Drummond came riding out of the grove, sitting erect astride the pinto, the bandages she had made still around his head and his leg. With him was a tall, bony looking man with a sad, gaunt face, sitting loosely astride a blaze-faced sorrel.

As soon as he saw the slight, brave figure walking toward him, Duane raised his arm in a wave. Angie saw his teeth flash in the sun.

"Hi, there!" he called. He swung down off the pony.

Slowly, Angie brought the rifle up to her shoulder. She sighted along the gleaming barrel, taking a bead on Duane Drummond's chest. "Get back on yore critter, Drummond," she said through her teeth, the words clear and cold. "You and yore friend get going back down and out of Mystery Mesa, and don't come back!"

He stopped, stiffly. The smile faded.

"Angie!" he cried out. "What's the matter with you? Are you crazy?"

"Not any more, I'm not loco," she said. "Do like I say, Drummond, or I'll shoot you right where you stand."

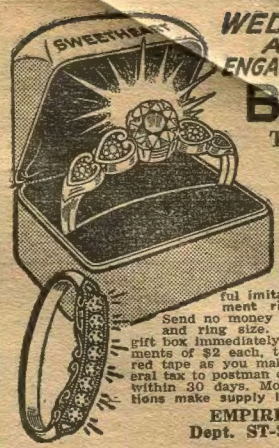
Grim-faced, he ignored her warning, came on toward her, saying: "I dunno what's come over you, Angie, but let's get to the house and straighten things out."

"One last time!" she cried.

But he didn't seem to hear. He came on toward her, walking faster. "You wouldn't shoot me, Angie."

She tried to press the trigger, but her finger was suddenly stiff against her will.

Finally the rifle lowered from her shoulder. It slipped from her suddenly lifeless, icy fingers. She tried to see, but everything



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was a crystal blur in her eyes and hot tears were burning down her cheeks.

Then Duane was close to her and his hands were on her shoulders. His touch made her wild with fury and she yanked away from him and swung her hand in a stinging slap to his face. She choked out her words of hate for him. She didn't, couldn't, hear the things he was saying back to her.

But in a few minutes she felt his arms close around her and she felt herself being swung off the ground, held tightly in his strong embrace so that her efforts to fight free, her struggling, did no good.

After awhile exhaustion came and she lay limp in the strong cradle of his arms. Gradually her brain cleared and his words began to penetrate. She forced herself to listen, to concentrate. She heard:

"—And then I come back here with the preacher so's he can marry us and this is the greeting I get. That's a fine way for a girl to treat her future husband!"

It took another few seconds for the impact of his words to register. Then she whispered: "You didn't come back here to get the gold?"

"What kind of nonsense is that?" he interrupted. "That man is Parson Withers, from Mesquite Flats. I got up real early and rode in to get him, figured we could get back, mabbe before you were up and around. Wanted to surprise you."

"But—but, Duane!" she said. "You stole my veil—you—"

"Sure!" he told her, laughing. "Come here and I'll show you why!"

He led her over to his pinto, un-strapped a package from the saddle horn, unwrapped it. Inside was a huge bundle, yards and yards of white tulle, exactly like the wedding veil. "I had to have the veil, honey," he said, "to match it up with material for a *wedding gown!* After all, what good's a veil without that?"

Suddenly the sun came out again in Angie's heart. She flung her arms around his neck. Her eyes were starred with tears of joy.

While the gaunt, sad face of Parson Withers slowly relaxed into an understanding grin, Angie Clayton kissed her soon-to-be husband.

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